

Notes on the Political Economy of Black Music

BY NORMAN KELLEY

*No race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long,
in any degree, ostracized.* —BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

Black culture is too significant in American culture for blacks to be glorified employees.
—RUSSELL SIMMONS, DEF JAM RECORDS

When the Bush Administration issued an official proclamation honoring Black Music Month in June 2001, it did so at the *end* of the month. “Two measly days to celebrate Black Music Month?” decried *Slate*’s Timothy Noah.¹ No malicious slight was intended, but unconsciously, this reflected the natural order of things with regard to a specific group’s contributions to this nation’s cultural heritage and economic well-being. After paying tribute to various black artists and noting how black music has told “many other stories, in many styles,” Mr. Bush concluded that black music is “always easy to enjoy, yet impossible to imitate.”²

Some citizens wondered what planet the president had been residing on, particularly since the phrase “always easy to enjoy” seemed somehow more suited to describing a soft drink. To be sure, black music is not a soft drink, but like one of today’s multiculti flavors, it has become a commodity that is indeed easy—easy to exploit. This is largely due to the fact that blacks, America’s foremost *forced* immigrants, have always been economically weak and thereby politically vulnerable. Although black music can be easy to enjoy due to phat beats and wicked hooks, Mr. Bush’s comments both mask and underscore the fundamental economic relationship between whites and blacks in this society.

Through various modes of production and avenues of exchange, the relationship between the two races has historically rested on whites’ ability to exploit and domi-

1. Timothy Noah, “Who Stole Black Music Month?” *Slate*.MSN.com/default.aspx?id=1007921.

2. Office of the Press Secretary, White House, “Remarks by the President in honor of Black History Month,” June 29, 2001, whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/06/20010629-8.html.

nate blacks’ bodies, images, and cultures. In the case of music, black artists have rarely received the just benefits of their work, especially in comparison to their white counterparts and those who control the music industry.

This state of affairs shouldn’t exist given the prodigious talents of African Americans in the realm of music. No other group in this nation has left a deeper stamp or a greater repertoire of styles and genres in America’s storehouse of cultural heritage than African-Americans. When people worldwide refer to *American* music they often mean, by way of shorthand, *black* music, due to the simple but largely unrecognized fact that black music is, essentially, America’s *mainstream* music. African-Americans, collectively and individually, have set the standards for both performance and expressivity in American popular music, and, to a certain degree, in popular culture in general.

It is the contention of this essay that black music operates within a “structure of stealing” that dates back to the time when the ancestors of today’s African-Americans began arriving to this country as slaves. Blacks served as commodities—objects purchased, controlled, and sold by others—while their labor was valued as an instrument in the production of cotton and other goods and services. Their heritage and transforming culture, however, were either ignored or exploited with impunity—or ridiculed, as in the case of black-faced minstrel music performed by whites in the middle of the nineteenth century. Needless to say, the dominant race would imbue greater value in the music of its own European heritage, while deriving ample enjoyment from the zany antics of the “others”: Zip Coon, Sambo, and Beulah.

The structure of stealing that has evolved since the slavery period has allowed both whites and blacks to ignore the critical roles of black music and black *labor* in the American music industry. Another factor has been the racial hierarchy of caste-coding blacks. Through a process of stigmatization, almost any endeavor by African-Americans—in sports, music, dance, etc.—is of less consideration than of that by whites, because it is seen as merely the by-product of “natural talent,” rather than the result of sustained learning, practice, discipline, and, most importantly, intelligence. “Natural talent” is like air: forever abundant and there for the taking.

Today’s recording industry is less focused on the physical production of music—searching for new artists, recording innovative music, nurturing talent for the future—and is more concentrated on the marketing and distribution of existing stars. Five music companies, represented before the three branches of the govern-

ment by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) in matters pertaining to the trade, have increasingly subcontracted much of the production of music to so-called “independent” record labels not bound by union contracts. At the bottom of this \$14-billion domestic music industry is a disrespected pool of black talent: America’s colonized Rhythm Nation.

To be sure, of the five major conglomerates that control approximately eighty-five percent of recording, production, and distribution in the music industry—AOL Time Warner, Vivendi/Universal, BMG Distribution, Sony Music Entertainment, and EMI Distribution (see chart on pages 34–35)—not one is black-owned. Rap moguls such as Def Jam’s Russell Simmons and Bad Boy Entertainment’s Sean “P-Diddy” Combs are either showcased or touted as model entrepreneurs in today’s hip hop–driven industry. What is often overlooked (if not patently ignored), however, is that their companies cannot distribute their music effectively without going through one of the five major conglomerates. Often, black subsidiaries are set up merely to respond to a parent company’s demand for a marketable product. In turn, the parent company responds to a young white audience that purchases sixty-six percent of rap music, as reported by the RIAA.

A primary example of how black artists have been colonized by the major recording companies—aided and abetted by blacks—is the case of Tupac. The multitalented rapper was originally under contract with Interscope Records, founded by Jimmy Iovine and Ted Field (heir to the Marshall Field fortune). Allegedly, Tupac was later “handed over” to Death Row Records’ Marion “Suge” Knight when the *enfant terrible* of rap was locked in a New York State penitentiary. While Death Row Records was the creation of Knight and Dr. Dre, it practically owed its existence to Interscope, and, some say, to a drug dealer named Michael “Harry-O” Harris. Desperate to get out of jail, reports document, Tupac signed an onerous agreement with Death Row that locked David Kenner (a Death Row attorney at that time, who also happens to be white) into the role of his counsel and manager—a direct and unmistakable conflict of interest. According to Connie Bruck, in her July 7, 1997 *New Yorker* article, “The Takedown of Tupac,” the artist was trying to extricate himself from Death Row when he was killed on September 7, 1996.

Those who run the American recording industry understand the importance of black music for both its domestic and international markets. The five major recording companies, according to the RIAA, provided retail outlets with ninety percent of the

music that the American public purchased in 2000. Rock music accounted for twenty-five percent of the total music sales, and rap/hip hop was the second most popular genre, with 12.9 percent, more than \$1.8 billion.³ On the international level, writes Harold Vogel, “recorded music generates aggregate worldwide revenues of some \$40 billion per year. But because it is the most easily personalized and accessible form of entertainment, it readily pervades virtually every culture and every level of society. As such, it may be considered as the most fundamental of the entertainment businesses.”⁴

There has been a growing awareness by blacks that something is amiss in the relationship between African-American artists and the recording industry. In *The History of Black Business in America*, Juliet Walker explains, “The huge profits the industry has earned from black artists have prompted some people to reach back into history for an appropriate term to describe the limited benefit that blacks have received and their general status in the industry; and so, one critic has surmised that record-industry blacks work under ‘plantation-like conditions.’”⁵

During the civil rights period, executives at major labels, looking at the success of the Motown and Stax labels with black artists, began asking themselves, *is black music profitable?* In the early seventies, CBS Records commissioned the Harvard University Business School to analyze this question. The university’s researchers returned with an affirmative answer, and with a tantalizing and insightful nugget: “Soul music is one of the very few basic art forms which is indigenous to America, although its own roots may be traced to Africa. It has been and probably will continue to be a vital and influential force on contemporary music. And Soul is by no means a static music form. It too will change.”⁶

Enter rap/hip hop, the post–civil rights, postmodern continuation of African-American musical forms, a direct descendant of soul, R&B, gospel, and blues, a product of America’s urban Bantustans. While rap music, like sports, has provided a few working-class blacks with a way out of the ghetto, it has given the music industry a constant source of cheap and talented labor.

3. Recording Industry Association of America, 2000 Consumer Profile, “Rap/Hip Hop Music Buyers Become Second Largest Segment, Record Stores, Mass Merchandisers Market Share Gap Narrows,” March 13, 2001.

4. Harold L. Vogel, *Entertainment Industry Economics*, 5th edition, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p.148. Michael Pfahl has cited worldwide music sales at \$236.9 billion; see Michael Pfahl, “Giving Away Music to Make Money: Independent Musicians on the Internet,” www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue6-8/pfahl/index.html.

5. Juliet E. K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship* (New York: Macmillan, 1998), p. 322.

6. Harvard Report (“A Study of the Soul Music Environment Prepared for Columbia Records Group”), May 11, 1972, p. 18.

Despite the likes of Russell Simmons and Sean Combs, black-owned record firms have practically ceased to exist as independent forces in the realm of music. Motown has disappeared from *Black Enterprise's* annual roster of the top one hundred black businesses in America.⁷ After all, Motown is now a subsidiary of Vivendi/ Universal, a giant French conglomerate; the label had to either merge or perish years ago. According to the June 2001 *Black Enterprise* roster, Simmons's Rush Communications had slid down from the fifteenth to the thirty-third spot in just a year. Even so, Rush Communications was the *only* ostensibly entertainment-based firm on the *B.E.* list. The former home of Def Jam records, Rush Communications had sales of \$100 million during the previous year. The sales figure for the *entire* black entertainment industry for that period, as detailed by *Black Enterprise*, was \$189.75 million. But rap music alone generated \$1.8 billion in sales.

In classic colonialism, products were produced in a raw periphery and sent back to the imperial motherland to be manufactured into commodities, then sold in metropolitan centers or back to the colonies. The outcome for the colony was stunted economic growth, as it was stripped of its ability to manufacture products for its own needs.

Many black communities in the inner cities of America share some of these traditional characteristics of a colony: low per-capita income, high birth rate, high infant-mortality rate, low rate of capital formation and domestic savings, a small or weak middle class, economic dependence on external markets, labor as a major export, land and businesses owned by foreigners, and a tremendous demand for commodities that will be consumed by wealthier communities.

When applied to the music industry, this neo-colonial model has to take into account the relative wealth and health of African-Americans as a group. The per-capita income of African-Americans, notes economist Amartya Sen in *Development as Freedom*, is "considerably lower" than that of white Americans, but African-Americans are "very many times richer in income terms" than the people of China or India. African-Americans tend to fare better than these groups in terms of infant mortality. Yet African-Americans tend not to live as long as their fellow citizens in the United States, or those in China and India. In the words of Sen, while:

American blacks suffer from *relative* deprivation in terms of income per head vis-à-vis American whites, they also are *absolutely* more deprived than the low-income

7. *Black Enterprise*, June 2001, Vol. 31, No.11: p. 104.

Indians in Kerala (for both men and women), and the Chinese (in the case of men), in the terms of living to ripe old ages.⁸ [original emphasis]

As reported elsewhere, men in Bangladesh have a better chance of reaching the age of forty than black men in Harlem.⁹

African-Americans are essentially trapped in a state of relative *underdevelopment* in this market-driven society. This anomaly is due to the fact that blacks have been deprived of what Sen calls the five instrumental freedoms: political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective securities. In order for individuals to live to their fullest capacities in a marketplace society, they need a full complement of these interconnecting freedoms.

With rap music, the inner cities have become the raw sites of cultural production, and the music, once packaged, is sold to the suburbs, to white youths who feel they can relate to those of the urban Bantustans (but don't have to pay the social consequences of being black in a predominantly white society). If there is indeed a struggle for the control of rap, it is merely a battle between black gnats. The war for the control of black music was won many years ago by corporate America, facilitated by a black leadership that has never fully understood the economic significance of its own culture.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century and in the early years of the twentieth century, the black elite worldview was molded on a white, bourgeois, Victorian model, as noted by Kevin K. Gaines in *Uplifting the Race*. Black leaders—educators, racial spokespersons, intellectuals, etc.—have historically had a condescending attitude toward the black lower class, both urban and rural. Even though the black elite was outraged by whites' lucrative expropriation of black culture, Eurocentric images and ideals of respectability were nonetheless central to the black elite's aesthetic tastes.¹⁰

Black leaders' ideas about "racial uplift" were based on differentiating themselves from the black lower classes, who were seen as "bringing down the race." Even today's black "public intellectuals" use various codes to disassociate the "good black middle class"—themselves—from the "bad black underclass," which is populated in part by those who identify with rap music and hip hop culture. Randall

8. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 21–22.

9. *Ibid.*, p.23.

10. Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, Race and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), p. 76.

Kennedy's feature, "My Race Problem and Ours," in the May 1997 issue of *Atlantic Monthly* is a modern-day spin on racial uplift; now, the racial extrication is based even more on class positioning. Such elitist attitudes throughout American history have prevented middle-class blacks and black leadership from seeing the worth of their own folk culture that spawned the blues and other musical forms that grew from the lower classes. Music from those "raw" Negroes, in fact, now forms the base—the very foundation—of the \$14-billion music industry in the United States.

Black musical genres emanating from the lower classes have been the "juice" that has long driven American musical expression—and whites have grown rich off of it. The black middle class has been too economically incompetent to champion and exploit (in the best sense of the word) its own folk culture and nurture the geniuses who have created the music. Black music has never had an enlightened leadership to give it a proper business footing. There has been no A. Philip Randolph or Thurgood Marshall in black music, visionaries who could organize musical artists or educate them about copyrights and contract law. In *Sound Effects*, Simon Frith notes one of many resulting dynamics:

The pop industry is organized around music as composition—American copyright law protects composers rather than performers. It is songwriters who get royalties when records are sold or broadcast, not their performers, and black singers who were popular in the 1920s and 1930s were systematically cheated out of their due returns. Their music, however distinct, was in a legal sense "composerless," and it was white publishers who rushed to copyright the resulting "spontaneous" compositions. Such exploitation of black musicians by publishers and record companies continued into the 1960s . . ."

The history of black music has been a continuous replay of the uncontested and lucrative expropriation of black cultural forms by whites. This variegated structure of stealing developed through the minstrel shows of pre-Civil War America, to segregating black music as "race music," to white composers copping black jazz styles, to white rockers covering black R&B songs, to publishers stealing copyrights, to the nonpayment of royalties due to black artists by record companies. All the while, black musical forms have comprised the backbone of American music, though

11. Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), p. 17.

blacks themselves, brought over to the New World as bodies for work, have been widely portrayed as having no culture worthy of respect in a civilized society. As slaves, they were "socially dead" and could thus be depicted as coons, pickaninnies and Sambos.

This is the basis of the structure of stealing in which other national groups—principally Anglo-Saxons (slavery), Irish (minstrelsy), Jews (Hollywood, the record industry), and Italians (through mob influence)—have participated. With the exception of Anglo-Saxons, the other ethnic groups were not originally considered "white," but through a process of Americanization eventually came to be viewed as such. Upon assuming the credentials (or badge) of "whiteness," these new Americans could begin exploiting a class of Americans who had been born in the United States prior to their own arrival, namely blacks. America's racial hierarchy and its politics of stigmatization would offer these groups—the newly "whitened" Americans—the means and the rationale to take advantage of an outsider class. However, it should also be noted that blacks, too, have engaged in the structure of stealing, as reflected in the history of black music. Within the hip hop community, the term "black-on-black crime" often refers to black label owners who fleece today's artists, and to one mogul in particular.

This structure of stealing, as Harold Cruse pointed out in 1967, is based on an *open* but unexamined network of interconnected operations, businesses, business practices, and social ties that mostly understand blacks as "talent," i.e., labor. Although Cruse used the jazz musician as an example in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, the same situation has always existed for black artists in blues, rock, R&B, soul, and hip hop. Beneath this structure, Cruse writes, is a:

whole history of organized duplicity and exploitation of the Negro jazz artist—the complicated tie-in between booking agencies, the musicians' union, the recording companies, the music publishers, the managers, the agents, the theater owners, the night-club owners, the crooks, shysters, and racketeers. The Negro creative intellectuals have to look into the question of how is it possible for a Negro jazz musician to walk around the streets of large cities, jobless, starving, while a record that he cut with a music company is selling well, both in the United States and in Europe. They have to examine why a Negro jazz musician can be forced to pay dues to unions that get him no work, and that operate with the same discriminatory practices

as clubs, halls, and theaters. The impact of the cultural tradition of Afro-American folk music demands that the racially corrupt practices of the music-publishing field be investigated.¹²

In sum, Cruse argues, “the individual Negro has, proportionately, very few rights indeed because his ethnic group (whether or not he actually identifies with it) has very little political, economic, or social power (beyond moral grounds) to wield.”¹³

The expropriation of black music has been so blatant and widespread that a Rhythm & Blues Foundation was set up in 1994, with \$1 million contributed by the Atlantic Foundation (of Atlantic Records) and other music-industry organizations. The foundation was designed to assist R&B artists of the forties, fifties, and sixties who had been “victims of poor business practices, bad management, and unscrupulous record companies,” according to the *New York Times*. Though well-intentioned, this program hardly provided a structural solution to the impoverishment of black artists. Because African-American leaders essentially ignored the early years of black music development in the United States, others moved in and established a foothold. Even during slavery, whites were dissing black folks while simultaneously taking advantage of them with the emergence of minstrelsy. Whites couldn’t ignore the creativity of blacks, and figured out “how to grow rich off of black fun,” as one minstrel poseur put it.

Over the years, sniping about Jews “controlling” the music business has obscured how blacks often ignored the “cultural-capital” potential of blues, jazz, and R&B until it was too late. The same can be said about rap music. It was independent labels, primarily white-owned (e.g., Tommy Boy Records, owned by Tommy Silverman; Wild Pitch Records, owned by Stu Fine; Profile Records, owned by Corey Robbins), not Motown, that produced the initial rap acts. The major labels rushed in only when they saw the staying power of the music and the young white audience, the desired demographic, that was buying it.

In his book *Blues People*, Amiri Baraka suggests that when Harry Pace, owner of Black Swan Records, began selling recorded blues music, he was castigated by the black middle class for not selling music that was more *racially uplifting*, meaning *not* sounding like music by lower-class Negroes. When jazz began circulating through

the speakeasies of America during the twenties, and via the new communication technology of the day, radio, the “big-brain” denizens of the Harlem Renaissance couldn’t figure it out. As noted by Nathan Huggins in his book *Harlem Renaissance*:

Harlem intellectuals promoted Negro art, but one thing is very curious. Except for Langston Hughes, none of them took jazz—the new music—seriously. Of course, they all mentioned it as background, as descriptive of Harlem life. All said it was important in the definition of the New Negro. But none thought enough about it to try and figure out what was happening. They tended to view it as a folk art—like the spirituals and the dance—the unrefined source for the new art. Men like James Weldon Johnson and Alain Locke expected some race genius to appear who would transform that source into high culture . . . [T]he promoters of the Harlem Renaissance were so fixed on a vision of high culture that they did not look very hard or well at jazz.¹⁴

The black intelligentsia of that era could no more accept the reality of its own folk culture than the white intelligentsia could accept the black basis of American culture. American society has always been *creolized*, long predating “multiculturalism.” Jazz and blues music were urban and rural expressions of working-class blacks, but the black intelligentsia, trained in the aesthetics of the dominant society and unable to produce a cultural philosophy of its own, neglected this very vital art in the hope that the music would evolve in a different direction. There was certainly a market for “race music,” as blacks bought five to six million records in 1925.¹⁵ In 1926 the record business reached a peak of \$128 million in sales, a mark that wasn’t again attained until after the Second World War.

Another reason that the economic potential of black music was not readily considered by the established black leadership was that the organization at the forefront of agitating for black inclusion in the American way of life—the NAACP—had a policy of *non-economic liberalism*. This policy was predicated on the ridiculous notion that African-Americans need not develop their own program of economic development in a marketplace society. After all, it was thought, if blacks could actually integrate, they would have free and unfettered access to the country’s economic system. The Depression of the 1930s exposed the fallacy of the NAACP’s position,

14. Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) pp. 10–11.

15. William Barlow, “Cashing In: 1900–1939,” Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow, editors, *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1990), p. 40.

12. Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of Negro Intellectual* (New York: Quill, 1967), p. 110.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

though the organization was saved from having to revamp its priorities by Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal.

The premier civil rights organization has never had to consider the merits of a comprehensive economic program. What passes for one today is a program centered merely around home ownership and small business development ("Home Ownership and Business Initiative"). It was W.E.B. DuBois, while still an active member of the NAACP, who pressed for an effective program ("Cooperative Commonwealth"), but he did so after having taken issue, years earlier, with Booker T. Washington's emphasis on economics over politics.

While both men were economic nationalists, DuBois criticized what he saw as the Wizard of Tuskegee's neglect of political and social issues. The irony is that both men were right: Washington's commitment to economic development could only have been strengthened by political action—DuBois's focus—given that white Americans had a history of enacting laws to limit the economic activity of slaves and freed blacks before the Civil War, and that of black entrepreneurs after 1865.¹⁶

Curiously, despite the legacies of such prominent black economic thinkers as Washington, DuBois, Marcus Garvey, and Elijah Muhammad, the post-civil rights, post-Black Power generation has not produced any credible economic thinkers. Conversely, black popular culture, by and large, has been gripped by a black orthodoxy that tends not to critically examine economic issues. The culture has become locked into a *100-percent-blackness* ideology, and warped by fantasies springing from Afrocentric and conspiracy-driven thinking. While the black public is vaguely aware of the relationship between African-Americans and the recording industry, it has rarely been offered a historical overview or even economic strategies to help rectify the situation. Thus, some of rap's most embarrassing vulgarities and its glorification of social pathologies are indirect payback for the black leadership's record of benign neglect of its own cultural patrimony.

There is no comprehensive historical analysis of how black music became part of a process of cultural expropriation of black culture. This informal process gave rise to the more systematic neocolonialization of black music that occurred during the industrial era of the late twentieth century, and which now feeds into today's music industry.

16. Juliet E. K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship* (New York: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 72–82, 122–126, 189–191.

Worse still is a lack of knowledge about the history of black entrepreneurship in the music industry. How did blacks fare prior to Motown?

In today's world, the development, production, marketing, and distribution of popular music receives little attention from black public intellectuals, particularly those who claim to be cultural critics. Instead, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Cornel West, Michael Eric Dyson (whose recitation of rap is much stronger than his analysis of the music industry), bell hooks, and Tricia Rose seek to decipher or decode "black cultural expressivity" or "representation." Music is either praised for its spiritual or cultural affirmations with regard to black struggle, or genres such as rap are mined for analytical nuggets before academic confabs.

Analyzing black music as part of the consumption/commodification process is the hip and lazy way out for most new-jack intellectuals. Through Frankfurt School theory, black culture is squeezed into the bankrupt paradigm of "cultural studies." These intellectuals reveal minimal historical understanding of the role of black music in American culture and offer no compelling analysis of how black music undergirds the record business. Rather than exploring the nuts-and-bolts trajectory of black music through the music industry, today's intellectuals have been more interested in discussing or breaking down the high/low distinctions of culture. They are driven to "interrogate" certain "privileged discourses." Left unexamined are many critical issues, including:

- how artists are recruited
- how record companies contractually ensure maximum profits
- how much money firms actually spend on the production of an artist's CD
- how musicians lose the copyrights to their music
- the paucity of royalty payments
- the overall effects of industry monopolization by the Big Five
- the absence of health-insurance coverage for the majority of recording artists

Interestingly, it has been rappers who have most clearly articulated their keen awareness of the lopsided condition of black creativity and the lack of economic rewards. Some of these artists understand the force of nationalism and the economic potential of black music—more so than the intellectuals who accrue a living by interpreting black music and culture for white audiences. Few people expect blacks to

control their own resources; they have accepted white/corporate domination as the natural order of things.

While black scholars seem to be asleep at the wheel, some whites are at least cognizant of the issue of commercialization and exploitation of music and its creators, as evidenced in the following works: *Rock and Roll is Here to Pay* by Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo; *Rockonomics* by Marc Eliot; *The Rise and Fall of Popular Music* by Donald Clarke; *Hit Men* by Frederic Dannen; *Stiffed* by William Knoedelseder; *American Popular Music Business in the 20th Century* by Russell Sanjek and David Sanjek; and *Mansion on a Hill* by Fred Goodman. Still, with the exception of *Rock and Roll is Here to Pay*, none of these books explores the economic exploitation of black music as a main subject. (Chapple and Garofalo's book, to their credit, has one chapter on the topic.) But at least these books contain information about and in-depth investigations of the seedy underside of the business.

In 1994, at the then-annual New Music Seminar, Public Enemy's Chuck D made an astute observation: "If we don't get up on the good foot—I'm talking to my people—then we're going to be behind the eight-ball again." Chuck D also noted that "white businesses have built themselves up and blacks are still working for the white businesses." This absence of scrutiny by black intellectuals of the political economy of black music allows hip hop to be treated as another "black problem" or something that needs to be contained through efforts by moral commissars. How the music industry is structured, and the role of blacks within it, is never openly questioned or subjected to debate or critical inquiry.

In the lexicon of some black intellectuals, musicians are considered "cultural workers"; as such, their creative endeavors are fed into the culture industry. If these artists are indeed cultural workers—and their output is no more privileged than any other form of work and is subjected to the same vicissitudes of the marketplace—then perhaps they should be organized into collective-bargaining units when facing the music industry. After all, the industry is represented by two trade associations, nationally and internationally: the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) and the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI). What do rappers have? Very little—several exceptions being a fledgling watchdog group called Rap Coalition, formed in 1992, and two unions, the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA), both of which have been widely criticized for ignoring the

needs of rap artists. Rappers are a bit like a free-floating sweatshop posse; but unlike their Third-World sisters who produce the footwear of choice, Nike, many rappers actually live large for a brief moment before disappearing from public consciousness.

In a March 1997 issue of *Newsweek*, rap was once again blamed for the ills of black America. But in the report, the white-controlled industry was nowhere to be found, nor were the white youths who buy sixty-six percent of rap music. As critic Leslie Fiedler observed, "Born theoretically white, we are permitted to pass our childhood as imaginary Indians, our adolescence as imaginary Negroes, and only then are expected to settle down to being what we are told we really are: white once more."¹⁷

Then there's the rebellion factor, also known as commodifying dissent. "People resonate with the strong anti-oppression messages of rap, and the alienation of blacks," said Ivan Juzang of Motivational Educational Entertainment, in *American Demographic* magazine. "All young people buy into the rebellion in general, as part of rebelling against parental authority." On the one hand, this amounts to a sort of vicarious emotional pimping for whites. Blacks serve as the "other," who are allowed to "act out," since they are beyond the bounds of "civilization." Marketers who want to appeal to white teenagers often start with the black community, targeting the inner city before moving on to the black middle class. Says Juzang: "If [marketers] develop the hardest-core element, we reach middle-class blacks and then there's a ripple effect. If you don't target the hard-core, you don't get the suburbs."¹⁸ In other words, blacks are unwitting trendsetters, whose tastes and talents are observed, detailed, and crunched as marketing points to music and fashion companies, a phenomenon aptly described by Malcolm Galdwell in his article "The Coolhunt" in a March 1997 issue of the *New Yorker*.

This marketing strategy has some particularly nasty ramifications. Black creation (music, fashion, "attitude") is taken up as a style by whites, "wiggas," who have accessed it through an intermediary source—rappers and music videos. This purchased "style" has the desired effect of boosting record sales. To some degree, the success of rap and hip hop culture represents a pervasive hollowing out of black culture itself. The urban folkways, musical expressions, and various styles of African-Americans have become grist for music, fashion, and media markets. Marketers know

17. Leslie A. Fiedler, *Waiting for the End* (New York: Stein and Day, 1964), p. 134.

18. Mark Spiegler, "Marketing Street Culture: Bringing Hip Hop Style to the Mainstream," *American Demographic*, November 1996, pp.28–34.

that if black kids—the naïve-but-sophisticated urban authenticators of postmodern American taste—can be induced to consume massive quantities of whatever is being sold, they, the marketers, can once again attract demographically desirable young whites to follow suit. To a certain degree, blacks have become the “accessorized other,” whose culture, through commodification, can be sampled and discarded, or used as a reference point for authentication. Even more pervasive is the economic incentive for young blacks to act and perform in ways that conform to white buyers’ concept of “blackness.” Rap music is supposed to be *about* “blackness,” as argued by some rappers, yet still plays into to a market-based expectation or interpretation of the term. Jay-Z’s niggatude in “Izzo (H.O.V.A.)” offers an example of the kind of thrill no real wigger can resist:

*Holla at me . . .
I do this for my culture
To let 'em know what a nigga look like
When a nigga in a roaster
Show 'em how to move in a room full of vultures
Industry shady it need to be taken over
Label owners hate me I'm raisin' the status quo up . . .*

And Jay-Z, according to Kelefa Sanneh in the *New Yorker*'s August 2001 music issue, is the “greatest of the corporate rappers.”

* * *

Since the days when illiterate blues musicians were robbed of their royalties and publishing rights, black leaders have been virtually silent on the music industry’s dubious business practices. It is much easier for the Reverend Jesse Jackson to complain about blacks not getting enough Academy Award nominations, or for Kweisi Mfume to address minority underrepresentation on television, than it is to systematically take the music industry to task.

With the NAACP reconsidering the efficacy of busing and other remedies to segregation, the whole policy of integration now appears to be faltering—due to the simple fact that black leaders rushed into the arena without adequately consid-

ering the economic consequences of integration. African-American leaders failed to develop a coherent plan to build a black economic base; integration was to be the salvation of blacks, especially the poor. The Bureau of Labor’s 1999 statistics show blacks representing a \$360-billion segment of the US economy, but that money, spent by black consumers, is largely directed toward and circulated into the dominant economy, not into African-American communities. Now, with the slow chipping away of affirmative-action programs and minority set-asides, blacks are beginning to think, “*Uh-oh . . .*”

W.E.B. DuBois once proposed that blacks strategically engage in self-segregation—in order to tackle certain problems that society would not voluntarily address in the black community—and then *re-integrate* into the majority society from a position of strength. He argued in *Dusk of Dawn* that a black economy was not yet complete but was nonetheless critical to the development of black communities:

*It is quite possible that it could never cover more than the smaller part of the economic activities of Negroes. Nevertheless, it is also possible that this smaller part could be so important and wield so much power that its influence upon the total economy of Negroes and the total industrial organization of the United States would be decisive for the great ends toward which the Negro moves.*¹⁹ [emphasis added]

This essay contends that the “smaller part” that could wield so much power and influence is, in fact, black music. However, given a historical combination of factors—racism, black leadership indifference, economic and legal barriers—black music is now an essential and integral piece in a corporate structure that is primarily owned and operated by whites for the benefit of white shareholders. Understanding this particular set of circumstances has not been high on the list of black intellectuals who have been schooled in the likes of Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan. “Foreigners who have not studied economics but have studied Negroes,” observed Carter G. Woodson, “take up this business and grow rich.”²⁰ This observation invariably leads into a discussion about the “black economy,” which is now a moot point. Granted, there have always been major structural impediments for blacks in business generally, and in the music

19. W.E.B. DuBois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of Race* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995), p. 198.

20. Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (Washington: The Associated Publishers [1933] 1969), p. 5.

business specifically: lack of credit, undercapitalization, poor distribution, inability to advertise, and white opposition. Intellectuals have often scoffed at the possibility of a so-called black economy, but, as Cruse has written:

The black economy is a myth only because a *truly viable* black economy does not exist. It does not exist simply because Negroes as a group never came together to create one, which does not mean that it would be a simple matter to create a black economy. But it could be done—with the aid of attributes the Negro has never developed, i.e., discipline, self-denial, cooperative organization, and knowledge of economic science.²¹ [original emphasis]

But the development of a black economy, as Cruse further argues, would take a:

[c]ertain community point of view, a conditioned climate, in order to exert impact (political, economic, and cultural) on the white economy. It means the studied creation of new economic forms—a new institutionalism, one that can intelligently blend privately owned, collectively owned, and cooperatively owned, as well as state-sponsored, economic organizations. It means mobilizing the ghetto populations and organizing them through education and persuasion (if not through authoritarian measures from above).²²

Consequently, black leaders have never been able to educate black talent about protecting their rights as musicians and artists, about earning a living from their crafts. If black music had been nurtured and understood as a source of cultural pride and cultural capital, African-Americans would have been able to more fully develop an entrepreneurial class of artists, businessmen and women, lawyers, and accountants, creating and supporting their own institutions. Today's black leadership has difficulty relating to those who are now the engines of a \$1.8-billion genre in a multi-billion-dollar industry. Such an estrangement is a self-inflicted cultural, political, and economic dead-end road. African-American leaders have bought into a whole set of assumptions about blacks based on white beliefs and the corporate-American rules of the game.

In other words, black music could have been used to help build a reasonably self-sufficient artistic- and middle-class that would have been unafraid to express its own

nationalism and build some level of group economic strength on the talent of its own people. Such a development would have entailed educating black workers and artists about how they are deeply enmeshed in a specific economic system, one that they have to deal with—and *should* do so by organizing on their own terms and interests, rather than focusing solely on racial solidarity. Blacks, like the Jews who played key roles in the creation of Hollywood, could have had “an empire of their own,” as Neal Gabler argues in his aptly titled book. African-American music could have been the force behind a black-led music industry with all the necessary contradictions of capital and labor. Despite the vision proffered by hip hop architect Russell Simmons in the statement that opened this essay, blacks remain glorified and underpaid employees in American Culture, Inc.

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21. Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, p. 310.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 314.