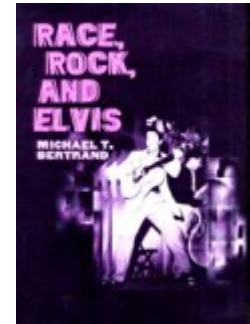


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Elvis and Identity in the Postwar South

Elvis and Identity in the Postwar South

It may not surprise the inquisitive mind that the debate surrounding Elvis Aaron Presley and his music also exists in the world of academia. According to Michael Bertrand, Elvis has served as the focal point for scholarly projections of sustained southern low caste culture. Conversely, for many southerners, Elvis has become a symbol of continued southern aberration and contribution to the America way of life. Bertrand notes that this is the essence of the “Sentimental myth of Elvis as a poor boy who made good; loved his mother, daughter, country, and Jesus; and gave millions to the unfortunate” (p. 116). Born to humble southern beginnings, the unorthodox crooner captivated young girls and enraged their parents before serving a two-year military stint and returning to be canonized by Hollywood.

Race, Rock, and Elvis contends that there is more to Elvis than these competing notions. Presley came of age in a socially turbulent modernizing postwar South, and according to Bertrand, the rock 'n' roll star was an “organic intellectual,” who promoted racial ideals contrary to those that prevailed in the South (p.11). Bertrand explores this Elvis and rock 'n' roll, the music and culture of defiant postwar youth, and concludes the music played a positive role in race relations and that popular memory has sanitized Elvis, stripping much of the racial, regional, and class connotations from his legacy.

Extremely insightful, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* explores rock 'n' roll as an episode of postwar southern economic interest and sociocultural projections competing against

Cold War personifications of unparalleled U.S. prosperity. Bertrand astutely argues that the realism of rhythm and blues and rock 'n' roll contradicted the postwar image of American prosperity and contentment, and that as the property of southern independent recording companies, criticism was motivated by both conservative aesthetic and established industry concerns. However, to capitalize on the music's growing popularity, major recording companies began covering rhythm and blues based material with white artists. Their failure to use black musicians produced a forged sound, which rarely found airplay on influential rhythm and blues' radio.

Afterwards, Bertrand contends that the majors signed “genuine” rock 'n' roll artists, de-emphasizing their southern hillbilly origins, but promoting the youthful aspect of their music. In 1955, RCA purchased Elvis' contract from the Memphis-based Sun Records, and likewise, Bertrand declares that by the end of the decade, the majors “had gained full control over rock 'n' roll's subcultural style and itinerary,” disconnecting the music from the concerns of its original constituency (p. 81, 89).

Race, Rock, and Elvis also contends that rock 'n' roll represented an historical “moment” in the process of cultural appropriation in America. Previously, white artists appropriating black music satirized or performed rigid interpretations. According to Bertrand, postwar rock 'n' roll artists were distinguished by “a willingness to identify completely” with black culture (pp. 99-100). Bertrand argues that this happened because within the mercurial social milieu of the South between WWII and the 1960s,

urbanization and modernization allowed transient white youth to confront their future with a perspective not entirely tied to the South's past ideas of race.

Bertrand contends that rock 'n' roll articulated positive black images and that after discontented white teenagers were "exposed to the popular message of black equality, southern white resistance to civil rights could never be massive or absolute" (pp. 170-171). Bertrand links rock 'n' roll to white youth dissent, which he argues is significant during southern "massive resistance," and thus, claims that rock 'n' roll "may have facilitated the racial reform that would eventually transform the south" (p.57). However, without sufficient analysis, Bertrand alleges the potential the music fostered dissipated in the late 1960s, when southern white attitudes toward race were altered by "civil rights demands going too far (and) black militancy" (pp. 44-45).

Race, Rock, and Elvis succeeds in one of its principal arguments. It illuminates social and cultural change that traditional political and economic focused studies ignore (p. 42). Recent monographs, including *The South in Modern America* and *The New South, 1945-1980* authored by Dewey W. Grantham and Numan V. Bartley, respectively, do not explore the origins of the music and only pose rock 'n' roll as a hybrid of commercialized southern music that drew the South further into the national cultural conformity.[1] Bertrand's work, like Pete Daniel's *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s*, suggest that rock 'n' roll was a significant social phenomenon, which indicated transient white working class grievances, although the two differ on the music's societal effect.[2]

In essence, Bertrand argues that white working class youth of the postwar embraced black culture as an alternative to middle-class and bourgeois values and although existing on the periphery and motivated by profit and entertainment, the resulting culture undermined traditional racial perspectives. Cultural historian Lawrence Levine argues that black "folk culture cannot be viewed accurately as predominantly a response to oppression and hardship. It was that, of course, but it was also more." Levine claims "the rootlessness and alienation which is so well articulated" in black music attracts other alienated groups, but that black culture has also been shaped by a corresponding "separateness and autonomy," which has allowed it to express a distinctive black point of view.[3] In the later sense, black music functions as protest, because much like African American literature, it affirms black humanity and hopes in the first person. White artists performing rhythm and blues changes those his-

torical circumstances.

My assertion here is that, if appropriation of rock 'n' roll by the mainstream can change the meaning of the culture, as Bertrand acknowledges, then it is feasible to suggest appropriation of rhythm and blues by southern whites changed the meaning of the music. White youths adopted black expressive style in rebellion against conventional youth and possibly class convictions, and while pioneering, their racial endeavors did not consistently extend beyond their overt acknowledgement of black musicians. In *Lost Revolutions*, an exploration of the postwar South, Daniel declares, "in the minds of students, dancing (to rock 'n' roll) had no association with African American culture." He argued that white musicians crossed the colorline, but their "blueprint for racial cooperation ... was lost on both political leaders and most whites." Daniel further asserts that the same southern generation that helped produced rock 'n' roll, also produced many who opposed school integration, voting rights, and joined White Citizen's councils.[4]

Bertrand proves his assertion that the southern rock 'n' roll culture of irregular interracial dances and biracial artists appeal was defiant, but demonstrates little evidence of this having any political or ideological ramifications on race relations. It did not reshape power relations between the races and it is unclear that it significantly changed white perceptions of the black masses.

A shortcoming of *Race, Rock, and Elvis* is that it does not explore rock 'n' roll after its appropriation by the national media in the late 1950s. Such an analysis might alter Bertrand's claim that the music's potential to improve race relations dissipated with Civil Rights legislation and the prominent emergence of Black Power groups in the mid 1960s. Journalist Nelson George argues that Elvis, after moving from Sun to RCA in 1955, attempted to escape his black style and conform to existing popular culture ideas. Although he was still associated with the myth of dangerous black male sexuality, no political subtext of racial equality followed Elvis. [5] Further exploration is needed to conclude if this is the story of rock 'n' roll in the late 1950s.

Such an analysis might also suggest that the music, while attractive to exploited whites, became a cultural compromise between the establishment and whites interested in rhythm and blues. Sam Phillips' search for a white blues singer indicates as much, because he understood that black artists appealed to limited demographics. Indeed, no black artist was marketed to a near degree of Elvis. Influential radio host Dewey Phillips also asked

Elvis what high school the youngster had attended in Jim Crow Memphis as a racial indicator (pp. 27, 46, 212).

Such an analysis does not obscure the talent of Elvis, but rather demonstrates, although he performed in a black influenced style, race and conformity were factors in his public career. It would agree with Bertrand that rock 'n' roll challenged traditional racial convictions and initiated sociocultural change in the postwar South, however to a lesser degree than Bertrand asserts. Black culture was tolerable pursuant to transient white working class interest and taste, particularly, but not exclusively, when performed by white artists. Black music invaded rebellious teenage culture, but Elvis, a white youth with black style, personified their musical rebellion. Rock 'n' roll was an indicator that a subjugated southern white proletariat and blacks shared similar cultural interest, but remained estranged over racial representation.

Bertrand makes two questionable assertions, both of minor detail, but of importance to racial perceptions. In his effort to prove that Elvis was not just dramatically imitating blacks, like nineteenth-century northern middle class minstrels, he argues that southern whites appropriated black culture because both groups subscribed to masculine values (pp. 32-39). Bertrand does briefly mention shared economic exploitation, but chooses not to emphasize a regional culture of racial collusion. Rather he implies that the manly "cool" associated with black culture is a masculine coping strategy to racism, because it was a white proletariat response to regional class conflict.

Robin D. G. Kelley has noted that such black masculine theories ignore the responses of black women. Likewise, Levine's cultural study has shown that the blues of the period showcased the egalitarian perspective and indelible presence of black females. However, white women artists are notably absent in early rock 'n' roll, which suggest masculinity as a trait of the white working class or the American mainstream, but not in the culture of the black masses.[6]

Lastly, in an effort to illustrate that not all white southerners were racist, Bertrand claims "white supremacy was not the sole motivation for many who objected to civil rights reform." Influential motives included southern conservatism and honor, McCarthyism, a tradition of local authority, distrust of federalism, oppor-

tunistic politicians, and "historically ingrained assumptions concerning black inferiority and perversion" (pp. 51). While recent civil rights scholarship has detailed that the South was not so solid in terms of massive resistance, it has also shown that the aforementioned postures have often masked racial prejudices.

We are indebted to Michael Bertrand for his aggressive look at popular culture and societal change in the New South. World War II and its modernizing influence remade America, and nowhere was change greater resisted than in the unrequited South. Marginal groups, such as African Americans and unskilled labors, seeking social mobility and economic access, were thought to have been its most receptive adherents. Bertrand's work skillfully uncovers a like group of opportunistic teenagers, who were introduced to the world outside the New South by televisions, phonographs, and specialized marketing. In a society resisting transition, their typical teenage rebellion combusted into rock 'n' roll, a music that challenged the stagnant sociocultural construction of the South. *Race, Rock, and Elvis* illustrates as much, but the dominant ideals of the music have yet to be determined.

Notes

[1]. Dewey G. Grantham, *The South in Modern America: A Region at Odds* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995): p. 323; Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980: The Story of the South's Modernization* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995): p. 433.

[2]. Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill; University of North Carolina Press, 2000): p. 175.

[3]. Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York and Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1977): pp. 296, 282-283.

[4]. Daniel, pp. 148, 174-175.

[5]. Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988): pp. 62-64.

[6]. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional: Fighting the Cultural Wars in Urban America* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1997): pp. 30-32; Levine, p. 225.

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