# Cultural Appropriation

### Appropriation in/of African American music

### The rise of technology and commodification

Capsule history of appropriation in 20th century American popular music  
(from *RIP! A Remix Manifesto*): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUlf1cO7Kbk>

A montage sequence from the movie we will watch later this term: **RIP: A REMIX MANIFESTO (2009).** This sketches the mutation of three musical motifs from their origins as blues to their existence today as commercial successes by white groups.

**Riff from “Country Blues”**

**COTTON FIELDS ->** **ROBERT JOHNSON ->** **SON HOUSE ->** **MUDDY WATERS**

**“You Need Love” / “Whole Lotta Love”**

**MUDDY WATERS -> LED ZEPPELIN**

**“The Last Time”**

**TRADITIONAL BLUES -> STAPLE SINGERS -> ROLLING STONES  ->->->** ???”

Siva Vaidhyanathan, *Copyrights and Copywrongs: The Rise of Intellectual Property and How It Threatens Creativity* (2003) [ some of this appears in Jonathan Lethem’s “Ecstasy of Influence” ]:

In 1948, Muddy Waters released a song for the Chess brothers’ Aristocrat label called “Feel Like Goin’ Home.” It was Waters’s first national rhythm and blues hit. “Feel Like Goin’ Home” was a revised version of a song Waters had recorded on his front porch in Mississippi for the folklorist Alan Lomax in 1941. After singing that song, which he told Lomax was entitled “Country Blues,” Waters told Lomax a story of how he came to write it. “I made that blue up in ’38,” Waters said. “I made it on about the eighth of October, ’38. . . . I was fixin’ a puncture on a car. I had been mistreated by a girl, it was just running in my mind to sing that song. . . . Well, I just felt blue, and the song fell into my mind and it come to me just like that and I started singing.” Then Lomax, who knew of the Robert Johnson recording of a similar tune called “Walking Blues,” asked Waters if there were any other blues songs that used the same tune. “There’s been some blues played like that,” Waters replied. “This song comes from the cotton field and a boy once put a record out—Robert Johnson. He put it out as named ‘Walking Blues.’. . . I heard the tune before I heard it on the record. I learned it from Son House. That’s a boy who could pick a guitar.”

In this brief passage, Waters offers five accounts of the origin of “Country Blues.” At first, Waters asserts his own active authorship, saying he “made it” on a specific date under specific conditions. Then Waters expresses the “passive” explanation of authorship as received knowledge—not unlike Harriet Beecher Stowe’s authorship of Uncle Tom’s Cabin—that “it come to me just like that.” After Lomax raises the question of Johnson’s influence, Waters, without shame, misgivings, or trepidation, says that he heard a version of that song by Johnson, but that his mentor Son House taught it to him. Most significantly, Waters declares in the middle of that complex genealogy that “this song comes from the cotton field.”

Waters had no problem stating, believing, and defending all five accounts of the origin of “Country Blues.” To Waters, one explanation did not cancel out the others. Blues logic is neither linear nor Boolean. Blues ideology is not invested in some abstract notion of “progress” and thus does not celebrate the Revolutionary for its own sake. The blues compositional ethic is complex and synergistic, relying on simultaneously exploring and extending the common elements of the tradition. Blues artists are rewarded for punctuation within collaboration, distinction within a community, and an ability to touch a body of signs shared among all members of an audience.

**The appropriation of African American music**

 “The notable fact is that the only so-called popular music in this country of any real value is of African derivation.” Leroi Jones, *Blues People* (1963)

**Minstrel shows**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79D447ZyP38>

The first purely American form of popular entertainment, and the most popular American form of entertainment throughout most of the 1800s.

A white interpretation of black music, culture, and world view.

Initially white people in blackface; after the Civil War (1860s) increasingly black people dressed up as white people dressed up as black people.

**Travesty**

Dressing up like a member of someone’s else culture, gender, etc. Minstrel shows were an example of this.

* Monty Python’s Flying Circus
* The boy actors on the Shakespearean stage
* Dialect humour in vaudeville

Travesty allows the person practising it to enjoy some of the position of the travestied person while retaining control of how that person is represented and being able to avoid any unpleasant ramifications of the actual cultural position. (Nevertheless, travesty may provide *some* understanding of or empathy with the travestied person’s position in society, and certainly suggests a desire by the person doing the travestying to play with the cultural behaviour for themselves.)

**Appropriation in Blues & Jazz**

Blues starts out in the late 1800s as an organic folk creation of African Americans. Songs have their origins in the cotton fields and taverns, though church music also plays an important role. Amateur musicians trade lyrics, music, and ideas around freely. No one is wholly responsible for any particular song. No one owns any song or can claim sole authorship of it. At first, nothing is published or recorded. Music is transmitted in performance alone. Each performance is a re-creation.

* Authorship and ownership are not clear-cut or considered that important
* Every performance is unique; little is published or recorded; songs are not “fixed” in an “original” or “authorized” version
* what you do with the material is what’s important; not who created the original or who “owns” it

**The appropriation of blues and jazz songs through publication**

James Weldon Johnson, [Preface to*The Book of American Negro Poetry*](http://www.bartleby.com/269/1000.html) (1922):

The earliest Ragtime songs, like Topsy, “jes’ grew.” Some of these earliest songs were taken down by white men, the words slightly altered or changed, and published under the names of the arrangers. They sprang into immediate popularity and earned small fortunes. [...]

Later there came along a number of colored men who were able to transcribe the old songs and write original ones. [...] I remember that we appropriated about the last one of the old “jes’ grew” songs. It was a song which had been sung for years all through the South. The words were unprintable, but the tune was irresistible, and belonged to nobody.

**Jazz and Recording**

When it comes to the music, appropriation + improvisation is the very essence of jazz.

As with the blues, it is not where you get things from, it is where you take them to (as Jean-Luc Godard [?] put it)

When it comes to the *idea* and *style* of jazz, however – despite the fact that it originated out of a musical creole that included blues, European classical music, popular march music and ragtime – it was basically an African American innovation that was quickly appropriated, imitated, and capitalized on by white artists.

Jazz did ultimately bring added legitimacy to African American culture in white minds and also moved a segment of the white population into closer alliance with and understanding of the black population.

As much as **cultural appropriation** is a **distortion** it is also a **rapprochement**.

**Appropriation in r&b, rock and roll, electric blues**

Mid-twentieth century appropriation was characterized by white musicians appropriating black styles and songs and capitalizing on them. White-owned music publishers picked up the rights to black songs, white-owned record companies recorded black artists, and white musicians adopted elements of African American style and popularized them with white audiences, sometimes making fortunes.

**The 1950s**

**Record labels (white-owned with a stable of black musicians)**

* Often paid musicians in hooch, or a one-time fee, if at all
* Held back royalties and sales information
* Offered unfair contracts
* Misrepresented authorship

**Chuck Berry, Chess Records, and Alan Freed**

Typical story of how a black artist’s music was appropriated and marketed to white audiences in the 1950s.

* Black musician Berry brings his version of a traditional country song “Ida Red” to Leonard Chess. Berry calls his version “Ida May.”
* Chess suggests a bigger beat, new  
  lyrics, and a new title, “Maybellene”
* Chess records Berry doing the new version and takes it to New York radio disc jockey Alan Freed.
* Freed plays it on the air and it becomes a hit.
* Rock and roll is officially born. (this is one of many stories of “the first rock and roll record”)
* In the 1950s, some record companies assigned co-composer credits to disc jockeys and others who helped “break” a record, a form of “payola” via composer royalties. This accounts for disk jockey Alan Freed receiving co-writer credit for “Maybellene.” Russ Fratto, who had been lending money to Chess, also received credit. The Freed and Fratto credits were later withdrawn. (Wikipedia)

**Cover versions**

When a black r&b or rock and roll tune started to become popular in the subculture, white labels would put out cover versions of the song by white artists who could be marketed to the white audience more easily. Black artists made little profit, white artists and labels cashed in.

Compare Little Richard’s original version of “Tutti Frutti”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F13JNjpNW6c>

with Pat Boone’s vanilla version:

[http://](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vv-LAbMbEn4)[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vv-LAbMbEn4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vv-LAbMbEn4)

**The “British Invasion” (1960s)**

English bands like The Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin reintroduce African American roots electric blues to the white American audience. Many white people at the time think the British invented this music.

Led Zeppelin’s “Lemon Song” (1969) – examples of how it is “plagiarized” and the ways in which it is original.

[Blind Boy Fuller, “Let me squeeze your lemon” (1936/37)](http://teachingsofdrjim.com/courses/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/04-blindboy.mp3)

[Arthur Mckay, “She squeezed my lemon” (1937)](http://teachingsofdrjim.com/courses/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/arthur-mckay-squeeze-my-lemon.mp3)

[Robert Johnson, “Travelling Riverside Blues” (1937)](http://teachingsofdrjim.com/courses/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/robertjohnson.mp3)

[Howlin Wolf, “Killing Floor” (1964)](http://teachingsofdrjim.com/courses/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/howlin.mp3)

[Led Zeppelin, “The Lemon Song” (1969)](http://teachingsofdrjim.com/courses/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/zeppelin.mp3)

**Plagiarism?**

**Wikipedia notes:** In December 1972, Arc Music, owner of the publishing rights to Howlin’ Wolf’s songs, sued Led Zeppelin for copyright infringement on “The Lemon Song.” The parties settled out of court. Though the amount was not disclosed, Wolf received a check for $45,123 from Arc Music immediately following the suit, and subsequent releases included a co-songwriter credit for him.

**To sum up …**

“black  artists  have always been the ones in America to innovate and create and breathe life into new forms. Jazz grew out of black America and there’s no question about that. However,  Paul Whiteman became the king of jazz. Swing music grew out of black America, created by black artists Count Basie, Duke Ellington. Benny Goodman was crowned king of swing. In the case of rock and roll, Elvis Presley – and in this case, not without some justification because he brought a lot of originality with him – became  king. Not the true kings of rock and roll – Fats  Domino, Little Richard, Chuck Berry … What happens is black people – the  artists – continue  to develop these things and create them and get ripped off, and the glory and the money goes to white artists. This pressure is constantly on them, to find something that whitey can’t rip off.”

- (white) R&B singer and promoter Johnny Otis, 1974 interview, quoted in Reebee Garofalo (2002), “[Crossing Over: From Black Rhythm & Blues to White Rock ‘n’ Roll](http://www.lipscomb.umn.edu/rock/docs/Garofalo2002_crossingOver.pdf),” in N. Kelley (Ed.), *Rhythm and Business: The Political Economy of Black Music*, 112-137.

**Reassertions of a uniquely black musical culture**

**1800s**

White people create “minstrel” songs  
Black people create THE BLUES

**around 1900**

Black and white people create ragtime for white audiences  
Black people create JAZZ

**1940s**

White people smooth jazz into swing  
Black people create BEBOP and R&B

**1960s**

White people listen to and do R&B and rock and roll  
Black people create SOUL, FUNK, and eventually HIP HOP