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ISSUES

## BLACK MUSIC: A DEGENERATING ART FORM

by

Sedeka and Alhamisi Wadinasi

From the very beginning, blacks in America developed a wide variety of song-types as a corrective measure to the limitations, demands, and imperatives placed upon them by their way of life. Black spirituals, in accordance with other song-types, reflected the oppressive experiences and imagery of black reality. When the black spiritual singers lamented and sang their songs, they looked forward to a better day, thus giving vent to their pent-up frustrations, while seeking to instill hope in their black listeners.

But while the blues were not religious-oriented and hope-inspiring like the spirituals, they were, on the other hand, down to earth in the sense that they reflected the reality of the black situation in America. They caused many blacks to question their allegiance to a god that seemed insensitive to their needs and plight, while, at the same time, teaching them to cope with and to understand the chagrins of a hostile white-for-black reality. That is, the blues reflected the disappointments, sorrows, longings and hard times of blacks. Both the blues and spirituals are only occasionally lighthearted, reflecting serious concern of the black American to maintain a sense of dignity in often nearly impossible circumstances. In the blues, especially, is found the will to endure, to relate the singer and listener alike to the shared sufferings of race, poverty, lost love -- to repeat the suffering in the hope of making the distress more tolerable through the knowledge that it is understood and experienced by all.

*Traditional Black Music*

As we have suggested, spirituals and blues (hereafter to be referred to as either early or traditional black music), had their genesis in the common experiences of black people. It reflected the social and economic status of black people, and was representative of their interests, goals, aspirations and values. From these mutual experiences, and awareness of shared oppression, evolved a black psychology--a black peoples consciousness. This common psychology or consciousness determined the black state of mind on a given condition or issue. The fact that early black music developed its themes along one line is proof of the existence of a common consciousness or psychology. We can, therefore, say, unequivocally, that early black music

was nationalistic, for any music which reveals racial strains, the consequences of disasters, wars, migrations, and other forms of interpenetrations, can be called nationalistic. Thus, analysis of early black music reveals that it was very expressive of the people's condition, that its language was common to and representative of all, and was clearly an intra-group phenomenon. Furthermore, it existed for the express purpose of highlighting matters of deep concern to the black community, and was their only true form of worship. Dealing with life itself, it spoke of and to the intense yearnings of black people who were able, through its magic, to find release in and often solution to many of life's complexities.

Thus, the context of early black music was a rich survey of customs, mores, activities, behavior patterns, values and material objects that were of main significance to the black American. It was, in fact, a synopsis of traditional black American culture. Functionally, it was many things: a moralizing and socializing agent, defense mechanism, therapy, entertainment, an explanation of causes, and an interpretation of the *status quo*. Furthermore, it contained a succinct survey of many basic institutions and customs, some described in detail, others merely suggested or implied; such as world view, philosophy, patterns of behavior, male/female relationships, aspects of political consciousness, ritual and religion. It provided a broad inventory of black material and spiritual culture, and gave references to basic techniques of coping with the negative reality emanating from the larger society.

#### *Black Music in the Sixties and the International Scene*

Similar to traditional black music and to all other realms of the black experience in America, the black music of the nineteen-sixties was coerced into correspondence with the reality of that day. Some say, for example, that the black music of the nineteen-sixties helped to bring forth the ghetto revolts of Watts, Detroit, Newark and Chicago. This juncture in the experience of black Americans, which was permeated with slogans, chants, and banners of the expressive and connotative reformist with revolutionary tendencies, in fact sparked a new level of consciousness and commitment in black musicians and writers of the time. For the lyrics and tones of their music, the rhythm and tempo of their instruments, and the vibrations and emotions of their voices lent succor, renewal and support to the black liberation movement that was then coming of age. Thus, black music accompanied and aided in paving the way for a new era of black identity, awareness and self-esteem.

Tunes like the Impression's "Movin' on Up" and James Brown's "Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud," which made it to the top of the charts, definitely captured the imagination

and approbation of millions of black people. Singers and musicians of this type became extremely popular among the black masses. They became politically functional black metaphors and symbols of black pride and identity. (In a word, they were, so to speak "grass roots-aristocrats.") For they created a new atmosphere and a new motif in black popular music which made it intensely difficult, if not virtually impossible, for any other style of black music to gain currency or achieve recognition. All in all this peculiar fusion of music and message posed a dynamic inter-relationship which gained not only currency but also precedence and preeminent influence among the grass-roots level of black America. Moreover, the travels and tours of black singers and musicians abroad influenced and confronted the awareness and/or consciousness of all other nations, peoples, and nationalities they came in contact with; to those who felt similarly oppressed the black American singer's musical-message energized and transformed their aspirations or lack of aspiration into a painful quest for self-identity and self-determination.

Thus, comparatively viewing the black Americans' condition (in a contemporaneous sense) with those of other oppressed "non-western" and "non-white" peoples, we have a paradox in that the latter benefited more from the black American cultural and political innovations and renewal of the nineteen-sixties. The black innovators and designers of the nineteen-sixties' political musical-message movement gave the world's people of color a profoundly astute and relevant sense of direction and purpose: for an international spectrum of peoples soon began to realize the grave necessity of national liberation and self-determination which coincided with the conviction of the black American struggle.

Consequently, the nineteen-seventies reveal that the above mentioned nations and nationalities (i.e., the non-western and non-white) "moved on up" -- as the Impressions' "Keep on Pushin'" enunciated -- to gain the higher ground of national liberation, independence, and psychological emancipation that today remains the most urgent need within the black American national community. Regarding the impact of nineteen-sixties black music on the international community, Julia Ann Williams asserts that

*No other group is mimicked as much as Blacks in all of their music, including the dance. And the Africans seem to set the musical pace for the rest of the world. Whites like Tom Jones, Elvis Presley, and the Beatles, freely admit that their music is a strict imitation of the Africans.*

*Traveling abroad some years ago, I became aware of the brutal exploitation of the Black American's music by White Americans who are raking in millions of dollars from the sale of records used to spread the*

*influence of the United States, most likely without the benefit of royalties or other compensation going to Blacks from which this music originated.*

*In Addis Abbaba, Ethiopia, I observed scores of Ethiopian youth milling around inside and outside of music stores, listening to American soul music and looking at albums whose covers displayed pictures of such stars as Ella Fitzgerald, Harry Belafonte and others.*

*In Accra, Ghana and Nairobi, Kenya, I listened to dance bands in hotels and night clubs in which the African musicians looked and performed exactly like African Americans. In Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, I was startled out of my sleep one Saturday night by an orchestra of East Indian musicians playing 'Sleepy Time Down South,' at the hotel at which I was staying.*

*In the early part of the evening they were playing and singing ballads and some popular music which didn't sound too hot to me, and consequently, I dropped off to sleep. Then after a while, all of a sudden, I heard 'Ole Satchmo' in all his glory, moanin' and growling with trumpet and voice in an 'Oh-so-steady' beat. My room was overlooking the veranda which supported the bandstand. For a moment I forgot where I was. 'Am I dreaming?' I thought to myself. 'Is Louis Armstrong really down there singing and blowing that horn? What is this?'*

One of the most all-encompassing aspects that characterized black music of the nineteen-sixties was the role it played in, and the impact it had upon, the first world<sup>2</sup> liberation movements of that era. Black music of this period had a high visibility and gained priority among the movements of other neo-colonized people and nationalities, of the world in general and of the first world in particular. Unquestionably, black music of the sixties reached and spanned the international scene. The facts speak for themselves, for the black musician's thematic mission and message was not limited to any given geopolitical sector of the first world. When their music was played, performed, or heard, it spoke to people everywhere: Cuba, Bolivia, Argentina, Oceania, Guatemala, Guiana, Gibraltar; and the black musical mission and message was as crucial and meaningful to people of color in North, South, and Central America as it was to those in Africa, Asia and Australia.

*Black Non-Culture in the Seventies*

To forestall the actualization of psychological emancipation that nineteen-sixties black music was suggesting, black America is being bombarded with "non-culture" as never before; we say non-culture because it lacks any sense of style or character to make it distinctive or reflective of the present black American situation. One major aspect of this non or anti culture is negative black music. For example, the music that today's black youth hears on the radio is not significantly different—except in a more negative sense — from what his parents heard twenty years ago. So-called "Disco" music has proven itself to be nothing more than musical re-hash.

Black American fashion also suffers from an obsession with the past. There is, for example, the '30s Look, the '40s Look, the "Happy Days" '50s Look, while the '70s Look seems to be the waste materials of all these thrown together indiscriminately. If anything new has been added by contemporary non-artistic fabricators, it is a sense of desperation, coupled with a peculiar kind of confusion, apoliticalness, apathy, complacency, disorientation and disillusionment.

Accordingly, black America seems thirsty for the nostalgia of the past, the "Good Times," "Cooley High" and "Sparkle." Moreover, through its popular "culture" she seems to be saying, "There is something wrong with the present. We are not sure about the future. For the time being, let's dwell on thoughts of the good old days, wherever we find them." There, of course, has always been a certain amount of good-old-dayism in black American life, but never to such a pathological degree. Most likely black America will regain its lost self-confidence, and new trends in cultural life will appear, but based upon the negativity of current black culture propagators, this will undoubtedly be a long time in coming. In fact, it seems that somehow blacks have lost touch with the "ideological" and "cultural" thrust of their own national struggle, and have become entangled in the unbridled antagonism of their own internal movement and conflicts, which are brought on and inflicted by the external forces of cultural genocide, political assassinations, and unprincipled criticism. Due to black music, to a large extent the nineteen-sixties was a time of motion — seemingly constant motion — movement, struggle and opposition to the negative, and denigrating aspects of America's sociocultural and political order. Vincent Harding capsulizes the role and significance of the nineteen-sixties' black musician when he states that

*In this direction [the nineteen-sixties] Black artists played a crucial role, articulating, popularizing, spreading many aspects of new ways of thought and action. Poets, playwrights, and musicians, especially*

*played a leading role in the creation and broadsiding of the new Black consciousness.*<sup>3</sup>

The primary role of the black artist in, for example, the Civil Rights movement and black power struggle was indispensable. The black musician was at the forefront of this struggle because his music was, as we have already mentioned, pervasive and all-encompassing.

As implicitly indicated in the present state of black music, the black musician of the nineteen-seventies stands in apparent contradiction to traditional black music for he refuses to struggle with and for those merits, values and virtues which distinguished his art in the past. As a direct result, and under external pressure, he has become relegated to a non-cultural entity of vacuity -- lingering supinely at an abstract turf of racial peace and co-existence at the expense of his identity and his culture. More obvious and frightening is that the ultimate effect of this anti-cultural activity is the refusal of the black musician to utilize the most powerful weapon he has at his disposal -- his music. Clearly, the black musician of the nineteen seventies has become not merely an individual but particularly an elitist, for he has forged an imaginary wall between himself, his music, and his people. But whether he realizes it or not, to cite Addison Gayle, Jr., "Unless he is very lucky or very White, he is not an individual but part of a group and his fate is mirrored in that of the group's."<sup>4</sup>

#### *Black Music in the Seventies*

For the nineteen-seventies, we are sad to say, that non-culture seems to be the "in thing." We have said many times that when White America assassinated Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X and subsequently took down the 'Colored' and 'White' signs, she in essence killed the aspirations and aborted the development of the black self or blacks with token pacifications and token gestures. If blacks had, for example, listened to Marvin Gaye when he sang his "Save the Children" they would have known right away that they were travelling in the wrong direction, or as Stokely Carmichael has said: "betraying the blood of their people." It used to be then, and not so long ago, that in a community context, black singers and songwriters sought identification with the black community, and to maintain their community experience as a source for their creative arts.

In the national context, black artists attempted to relate the black experience to the total American context and saw black music as something distinctive and as a contribution to the total American heritage. But today black music is being created in a vacuum, for the pressures and challenges of the American environment and all it means no longer create corresponding

responses in the content of the music, choice of medium, selection and refinements of techniques or lyrics. This seems to be true because the need to think "survival" has died. Likewise, the mentality which is predicated upon, and derived from the concept of survival, has passed. But we must also state, that something else is highly implicative of the black musician's lyrical-message, thematic mission, method, and style: that it is not enough to merely survive under the guise and persuasion of stylistic or methodical transiency; that it is not sufficient enough to simply keep one's music on the scene, irrespective of its mission or message, or without an equal emphasis on its communicative method and style. In more concrete terms, the music must have a meaningful mission and message, which is grounded in and moves out of the richest lore and life of the black community, especially for the black musician whose people have lived, struggled and died in an oppressive, confining society. In this light, the black musician's music and lyrics must be either an active kaleidoscope or a passive barometer of that collective experience.

Analysis of the active black musician's kaleidoscope consistently reveals the self-assigned responsibility of commitment to black life's past, present, and future. He is a definitive expression and partisan of the collective complicity of constant black struggle against all forms of external aggression from without the black community and internal combativeness from within, which undermines and threatens its growth and development. A revelation of the passive musician's barometer calls for little discussion, since he moves in the opposite direction.

#### *The Black Tradition in Black and White*

In essence, the carriers of black tradition are few in number. For example, the beliefs and customs or Hoodoo and Voodoo that are connected with black music are something of which the majority of blacks have the slightest idea. Only those directly occupied with creating positive black music are real carriers of the proper tradition of the black experience in black music.

At this point, it becomes important to look at the white musicians and writers who are seemingly involved in this process. Even though such white artists as Phoebe Snow, Elton John, David Bowie, Boz Scaggs, and the Average White Band are presenting more positive music today to blacks, they can never be said to be anything other than passive carriers of the black experience, because those outside its circle--academic writers included--have consistently proven that they have no desire (innate, latent, or liberal) to see black experience perpetuated in black music, or other art forms. Some of them, of course, have not only listened to but also studied black music so intensely that they remember



its development fairly well, and by conversing with them, one is able to get a fairly good account of it. However, their cultural orientation and cognitive development do not allow them to relate experience in their music to blacks. That is, they cannot relate what they have not felt, experienced, and do not know. This is why we call them passive carriers of the black experience as opposed to active carriers. Since they will forever remain passive carriers, they will never play any viable or vital part in the perpetuation of the black experience, or the development of a worthy tradition in black music and other art forms. Along these lines, J. Tyson Tildon writes in his *The Anglo-Saxon Agony* that

*Most Blacks contend, to their dismay, that Whites elect not to understand. Because of the inherent injuries and atrocities visited upon the Black people as an adjunct to the American system, they are led to believe that the lack of communication results from the White man's calculating, exploitive, and usurious nature. Although these evils are a part of the White man's problem, the major factor prohibiting him from listening to a Clark or a Cleaver is that he does not have the capacity to understand them.*

*Black people know who they are. They understand and realize their identity much more fully than do the Anglo-Saxons. There are a few non-Black authors who are beginning to appreciate this phenomenon...<sup>5</sup>*

What can be added to this is that black people understand not only their identity better than whites, but also their culture, experience, and history. A non-black can, of course, please him or herself and others hungry for "color and things black," but his or her beautiful music remains the idealization or plagiarization of the black musical tradition. It is only a musical notation mixed up with longings and protests against the sterility of the West. Therefore, they have contributed nothing to the black experience or black culture. Moreover, we can say that this particular phenomenon borders on cultural cannibalism. Stephen Henderson spells this out when he states:

*American has a historical compulsion, a megalomaniacal greed to appropriate all that she can from oppressed people, and the insensitivity and arrogance to destroy or pollute what she cannot use. Today young Whites are discovering the old country blues, presumably because they have some personal and cultural need--the need for roots of a rootless people. I don't begrudge them their need, but I do begrudge*

*their arrogance, their condescension, and their affluent boredom, for beneath it all is the old cannibalism. When Janis Joplin says that she admires Tina Turner and Willie Mae Thornton, that's her right and privilege as a musician, but when she says that singing Black makes her Black, and 'being Black for a while makes her a better White,' she exhibits the old American arrogance, the old master-slave relationship.<sup>6</sup>*

Thus, we come to today's two schools of black musicians and lyricists: the negative and the positive, or the apolitical and the political. The negative can be equated with the White school or passive carriers, and the positive with the definitely black school or active carriers. One quick example of both would be Billy Paul of the negative school, and Gil Scott-Heron and the Midnight Band of the positive school.

But we feel it important here to elaborate a bit on this so-called negative school. To paraphrase our good friend Kalamu ya Salaam, for example, we can say that black music must continue to be positive because it gives either a positive or a negative sense of identity, reality, purpose and direction. And that without a positive sense of black culture, black musicians can only at best produce a kind of music which is only a reaction to white music, or at worst, a caricature of a caricature. If black musicians are to avoid this kind of mistake and be creative they must first of all possess -- as Gil Scott Heron and others possess -- a positive black cultural context out of which their creations will be derived.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Gil Scott-Heron is definitely aware of the fact that black people are still oppressed, which means that his music is just as aesthetically creative as it is politically oriented, in terms of his not losing sight of the struggles of black people.

This is where we come to the politicalness of apoliticalness of things. There is no doubt that everything is political, and because everything is political, everything becomes important. For example, if black people were to say that they prefer to process or straighten their hair as opposed to wearing an Afro, they (whether they are aware of it or not) would have made a political choice. Likewise, when black musicians prefer to create negative as opposed to positive music, these are political statements, too; they mean that they no longer care about perpetuating the black experience in the black musical tradition, that they no longer care about black people, about their struggles or apathy, their awareness or non-awareness, their education, de- or mis-education, their identity or non-identity, and their aspirations or non-aspirations.

It is thus no accident that blacks are currently getting such apolitical songs as "Let's Make a Baby," "I'm Not in Love," "Married Not to Each Other," "Kiss and Say Goodbye," "Finders Keepers," "It's Over," and "I Want to do Something Freaky to You." We feel that the foregoing songs tend to suggest many negative things. For example, when a black woman says to her black man, "I'm Not in Love," to us she is saying that she isn't willing to be committed to the relationship, and thus the actualization of Black nationhood any more. Or songs like, "Me and Mrs. Jones," or "Jody's Got Your Gal and Gone," suggest that it is perfectly all right to disrupt the marriages or relationships of other blacks, a kind of decadent mentality which deviates very little, if at all, from the "Crabs-in-the-Barrel syndrome."

So, in terms of politicalness, such songs demonstrate that their singers and writers no longer believe in anything of value and if blacks listen to these songs, it means that they no longer believe in anything, or that they will no longer believe in anything after they have listened to them long enough. Furthermore, we feel that the reason that this kind of degenerate music has emerged is because these black musicians and writers have either lost their values, never had any values, or have always wanted nothing but white values. It has also emerged because of the black attempt to adapt to new social conditions and circumstances: namely, cultural pluralism and a continuing self-imposed disillusionment. In essence, then, we can say that the political black musician's mentality can be equated with the concept of individuality, and the apolitical with the concept of individualism, as expressed by Haki R. Madhubuti in the following characterization:

*Individuality is the expression of the self in concert with the collective selves; whereas individualism is the expression of the self at the expense and in contradiction to the collective selves. Therefore, a person working at odds with the collective frame of reference of the majority is an example of individualism that can greatly and generally does immobilize the institution.<sup>8</sup>*

Accordingly, then, black musicians must first of all acquire a value for creating black music, but the sad fact is that too many of them do not -- they seem to be in it only for the money. In this time of political apathy, non-direction and disorientation, these black musicians and writers seek to make blacks apolitical and set them in the wrong direction. Perhaps this truth is what has led Lerone Bennett, Jr. to make the following germane observation: "For the first time in this country, our major cultural innovators are consciously copying the worst aspects of White popular culture."<sup>9</sup>

Apropos of the above statement by Bennett, the black musician is unlike the black athlete in that he is the apogee of black cultural innovation. He or she is the major link in the chain of black cultural continuance. But more important than this, he or she transforms and initiates traits and trends in black culture. If these innovations and constructs are detected, adopted and institutionalized by the grass-roots people from whom they were derived, they will eventually become a part of black culture.

But Bennett goes on to note that

*This is a historical fact of capital importance, and it tells us that we are being invaded and overwhelmed for the first time in our history on the level of the psyche, on the level of the foundation of Black heritage.*

*It is also important to note the new tone and the new values of so-called soul music. Now, intellectuals, as you know, seldom listen to the music of the people. But we had better start listening. One of the biggest hits on the soul parade in recent weeks was a little number called, 'I want to do Something Freaky to You.' This is the tone and texture of the new music. All day long and all night long, messages of freakiness, hustling, and social disorder, messages teaching freakiness, hustling, and social disorder--messages beamed not to the old, who should know how to take care of themselves, but to the young, who are vulnerable and malleable.*

*This dangerous drivel is being drilled into the souls of our youths twenty-four hours a day. John Hope Franklin and Vincent Harding theorize, Gwendolyn Brooks rhymes, Benjamin E. Mays dreams, the Association meets, and day after day, twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year, in ten thousand hamlets and cities, a corrosive acid of so-called Black movies and so-called soul music eats away the moral and material foundations of the political economy of Blackness.<sup>10</sup>*

Coincident with and reflecting Bennett's concern for the present situation of black music, John O. Killens, in an overall criticism of the black writer, black people, and the black situation in general, poses the following question: "Why are not the poets writing meaningful lyrics for Black singers?"<sup>11</sup> His answer to this is that "Just as in film, Blacks are subsidizing the music-album industry. Yet we must content ourselves with nonsensical and negative lyrics about unrequited love, illicit love: ME AND MRS. JONES GOT A THING, SOCK IT TO ME! SOCK IT TO ME! Wake up

poets. Why not lyrics about Attica, Vietnam, Wounded Knee? How long will we continue to subsidize our own degradation? Think of the impact on our children. Think of our posterity."12 A paraphrase of Killen's comments may read: "With the articulate assistance of black history at our disposal, it should be clear by now, that it is the responsibility of the poet to determine the values by which the race is to live, struggle, and die, on the one hand, while on the other it is the obligation of the musician to gather up and galvanize those said values and present them to the people in an artful manner that is consistent with their life and history and conducive to their growth and development. If the poet sprang from a condition of grueling oppression his poetry is graphic, revealing, abrupt, aggressive, and picturesque. It suggests resolutely the nature of that condition, its impact on the people's culture, and its challenges to their life and future. His poetry is in no way and by no measure languid and non-concerned." We have presented these somewhat extensive quotes because both authors echo our sentiments in that they are both concerned about the effect of negative music on the cognitive and psychological development of black youth.

#### *Black Lyricists: Apolitical and Political*

Our response to Mr. Killen's question is that in disagreement over the real situation of Blacks in American society, the apolitical black lyricist feels no disgust, sees no cruelty, detects no hypocrisy, and thus finds no racism or a retrogressive black situation against which to battle or pronounce. This is not surprising, because he is distinct in that he does not manifest a vision from the perspective of black liberation, black unity, or from the conviction that blacks are at war, that there is an enemy, and that music is a weapon in which the strong antipathy of blacks for white supremacy finds its locus. The political black lyricist is, of course, the anti-thesis of the apolitical black lyricist, for in his music the appeal is to those deep-rooted motifs of human personality, rage and contempt, aimed at moral and social correction. In his book, *The Militant Black Writer*, Stephen Henderson summarizes the epitome of the political and authentic black writer. One need not attempt to confine Henderson's sentiments to the writer only, for they are highly applicable to the political black poet, black lyricist, and black musician. He asserts that:

*Black writers are 'militant' only to White people and to Negroes who think 'White,' for merely to say, 'I'm Black,' in the United States is an act of resistance; to say out loud, 'I'm Black and I'm proud' is an act of rebellion; to attempt systematically to move Black people to act out of their beauty and their Blackness in White America is to foment revolution.*

*To write Black poetry is an act of survival, of regeneration, of love. Black political writers do not write for White people and refuse to be judged by them. They write for Black people and they write about their Blackness, and out of their Blackness, rejecting anyone and anything that stands in the way of self-knowledge and self-celebration. They know that to assert Blackness in America is to be 'militant,' to be dangerous, to be subversive, to be revolutionary, and they know this in a way even the Harlem Renaissance did not.*<sup>13</sup>

To explicate Henderson's quote along musical lines, one could venture to say that Henderson would agree that black music realizes itself not only as to its lyrics, chordal progressions, and the like, but particularly as to its intent. The political black musician's pronouncements are rooted in political realities. But more than being grounded in politics, the authentic black musician's music tends to be visionary, suggestive, intuitive, and perceptive in addressing itself not only to the black man's emotional needs and immediate concerns, but also to the black man's metaphysical self as well -- i.e., to that aspect of the black man's self which would take part in the musician's visionary experience.

#### *Black Music: Traditional Versus Contemporary*

The black element has traditionally always been the dominant ingredient in American culture. Such ingredients have always been delineable in music and dance, linguistic influence, in folklore and literary imagery, and in rhythm, the tempo and the emotional overtones of almost any typically black version of any cultural art form.

Thus black music, prior to the supine or ineffectual black-white musical diarrhea that we are currently getting, had contained spontaneity and fresh creativity while white music tended to be sterile, imitative, and stereotypical in character. This contention is not far-fetched when one, for example, realizes that white music has never really moved its immediate listeners, and more than that, that it barely survives cultural while black music, on the other hand, has been creatively potent at all musical levels -- i.e., at the folk, popular and classic levels. It has, moreover, been vital in its instrumental and vocal forms, and has never ceased to move the entire world.

This kind of creative vitality and versatility, this contagious dominance are the characteristic traits of the black cultural product, especially in music. They are still being retained today by a few -- Gil Scott-Heron, John Handy, Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes, the Stylistics, Bill Withers, Earth,

Wind and Fire, Ramsey Lewis, The O'Jays, Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, Bob Marley and the Wailers, for example -- but they have been sacrificed by too many others. This is why it became necessary for us to comment, as Lerone Bennett has, on this most serious mistake or deviation from the black cultural context. Thus, we have a choice to make; whether to boycott the negative music and buy the positive, or just remain passive spectators (as W.E.B. DuBois once said) on the train of life, who become so obsessed with the relationships or lack thereof, with the other passengers on the train that they never think to ask where the train is going. In essence, if we are committed to black culture and thus to ourselves, we can stop this bombardment of negative music. We can stop it by putting pressure on these individual musicians and the recording industry, through position papers, phone-in campaigns to radio stations and disc jockeys, letters to the editor and so on.

It is necessary that we begin some kind of campaign against this negative culture because it works its way into the consciousness of our young and is no less than an assault against our children who may not know what traditional black culture or the black experience is all about. Parallel to our concern about the destiny of our youth, Lerone Bennett, Jr. asserts that

*A whole generation is emerging with little or no understanding and little or no relationship with the roots of Black culture. A whole generation is emerging with little or no understanding of jazz, the blues, and the spirituals -- a whole generation which knows little or nothing of Duke Ellington or Count Basie, not to mention Carter G. Woodson or W.E.B. DuBois. This is a challenge to our existence as a people. For if we ever forget what the blues were and are, if we ever forget the spirituals and the old Black preachers and maids and cottonpickers and what they suffered and dreamed, if we ever forget where we came from and what we are and must be, if we ever, in a word, forget our soul, all the technology in the world will not save our bodies.<sup>14</sup>*

Therefore, the creators of negative music have consistently proven that they are diametrically opposed to the revelation of traditional black culture. They, too, clearly reveal that they are interested only in dollar approaches to black culture and the black experience, for the kind of music they are creating is the epitome of cultural pollution and corruption.

#### *Conclusion*

Early or traditional black music developed in a characteristic way -- a way not dependent upon other traditions or other

world views. Since its inception, it was pressed into the service of survival, of agitation and change, and was consistently responded to by the black community. It addressed itself to a particular situation by persuading its adherents of the validity of its cause, the absurdity of the status quo, and of the American mentality. It, therefore, had its genesis and evolved in a political context, and was resolutely functional. It also promoted the motif of struggle and survival so consistently that the epitome of black consciousness was the knowledge that one day they would do more than merely survive -- i.e., one struggles to survive, survives to struggle, and eventually begins to live, moving away from reaction into action.

Music, as an art form, can provide the wings of thought and action by which a metamorphosis from a slave mentality to a liberated mind can take place at a pace in keeping with the strides of critical events. It can be a sensitive and compelling force in promoting self-pride and self-love in the minds of the masses. For the subjective characteristics of music can be used to project love, hate, fear, complacency, self-hatred, self-abnegation, defeat, indecision, struggle, political awareness, and anger on specific topics in selected situations which lead toward defined goals of either regulated resistance and mass solidarity or disunity, surrender and subordination.

Black music which projects the black image, black awareness, and black existence can exert a quickening force on the orientation of blacks toward a more positive view of their inner selves. Accordingly, black American culture, history, folklore, ritual and celebrations, must continuously be explored by the black musician to instill in his or her people a meaningful sense of self-worth in the grand scheme of universal phenomena.

The true Black musician is heir to the highest form of freedom in black American cultural expression. If this musician is imaginative and creative, he or she has many ways of revealing all the emotions peculiar to the life style of black people. Music gives feeling to the full range of human emotions from laughter and romantic ecstasy to despair and deep sorrow. Cosmic experiences are expressed in a myriad of rhythmic vibrations at tonal variations which characterize the unique soul of black people. The traditional and political music of blacks must surely indicate that they pulsate with the universe. Thus, we have attempted to say that the act of making, writing, or composing black music involves two ingredients: the black experience and the musician/lyricist/composer. That the musician/lyricist/composer's personal experiences and his cultural surroundings cause him to see certain forces and ignore others.

As the music we know is primarily a product of musician alone, and is filtered through these persons, their degenerate



ness, impotence, self-alienation or self-hatred, unconsciously become our own; and the more influential the musician, lyricist, composer, the more widespread the above-mentioned values become. In essence, the Black musician/lyricist/composer is a leader whether he or she likes it or not. As such, they must attribute their existence to the continued existence of black people as a whole, and not to pieces of paper, or pieces of tin, for at this juncture in history, not a single black person can afford the luxury of self-aggrandizement only.

#### Footnotes

1. Williams, Julia Ann, "Education and the Black Theatre," *African Opinion*, Dec./Jan., 1971, pp. 13-14.
2. Throughout this paper, we have consistently used "First World" as opposed to "Third World" in reference to all people of color. We have abandoned the concept "Third World" because it is a salient anthropological misnomer as well as highly unsound and unscientific. It has long been conceded that Africa is the mother of civilization, for there is strong ethnographic, paleontological, and archaeological evidence which evinces and supports this reality, and thus lends credibility to the conclusion that Africans in particular and all other peoples of color in general constitute the world's first people. Moreover, the "Third World" concept is one of those back-to-the-bus, parochial concepts that should have been abandoned by serious-minded, progressive Black scholars long ago. Thus, we sincerely hope that our conceptualizing in this matter is met with the least amount of dogmatism.
3. Harding, Vincet, "The Wedge in America: Struggle, Crisis and Hope, 1955-1975," *The Black Scholar*, December, 1975, p. 40.
4. Gayle, Addison, Jr., "Cultural Nationalism: The Black Novelist in America," *Black Books Bulletin*, Vol 1/Fall, 1971, p. 8.
5. Tildon, J. Tyson, *The Anglo Saxon Agony*, Philadelphia: 1972, pp. 104-105.
6. Henderson, Stephen E., "Blues, Soul, and Black Identity: The Forms of Things Unknown," *Black Books Bulletin*, Volume 1/Fall, 1971, pp. 36-37.
7. The material for this footnote was drawn from numerous Kalamu ya Salaam's essays and thoughts. For specific insight into his cultural philosophy, see Nkombo and *The Black Collegian*.
8. Madhubuti, Haki R., "The Building of Black Extended Family Institutions," *The Black Collegian*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Nov/Dec., 1976, p. 24.

9. Bennett, Lerone Jr., "Remarks at ASALH Sixtieth Anniversary Meeting," *Negro History Bulletin*, Volume 39, Number 2, Feb. 1976, p. 525.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 525.
11. Killens, John Oliver, "Who needs it: The Black Culture Generation Gap," *Black World*, August, 1973, p. 29.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
13. Cook, Mercer and Henderson, Stephen, *The Militant Black Writer*, Madison: 1969, p. 65.
14. Bennett, Lerone, Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 525.