

ARCHIVES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC AND CULTURE

liner notes

NO. 14 / 2009-2010



**Reclaiming
the Right
to Rock:**

Black Experiences
in Rock Music

aaamc mission

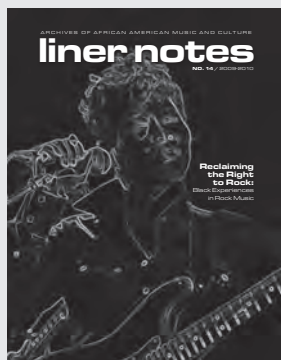
The AAAMC is devoted to the collection, preservation, and dissemination of materials for the purpose of research and study of African American music and culture.

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On the Cover:



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Photo by Hsinwen Hsu
Artistic rendering by Dennis Laffoon

From the Desk of the Director

This issue of *Liner Notes* follows several months of engagement with three major projects. From January through August 2009, the Archives' traveling exhibit *Rock, Rhythm, & Soul: The Black Roots of Popular Music* attracted large audiences at City Hall (Bloomington, IN), the Crispus Attucks Museum (Indianapolis), the Black Cultural Center at Purdue University (Lafayette, IN), the Evansville African American Museum (IN), the San Diego County Fair, the Indianapolis Black Expo, and the Paul W. Ogle Cultural and Community Center at Indiana University Southeast (see story in *Liner Notes* no.13).

The Archives hosted a major conference, *Reclaiming the Right to Rock: Black Experiences in Rock Music*, in November 2009 on the Indiana University Bloomington campus. The purpose was to document black experiences in rock music, to explore rock's roots in and relationship to African American traditions, to initiate archival collections, and to facilitate scholarly research on this genre. The lively two-day conference and week of pre-conference events featured musicians, critics, and scholars from the East and West Coasts as panelists and performers. This historic event attracted over one-hundred participants of all ages and ethnicities from throughout the country (see inside story).

The Archives' technical staff completed the GRAMMY Foundation® Grant project, *Pioneers of Rhythm & Blues*. This project digitized the interviews from the Michael Lydon collection and my personal collection (see story in *Liner Notes* no.13). Our staff currently is creating digital preservation files for at-risk materials in the William Barlow (black radio), Mellonee Burnim (gospel), and Phyl Garland collections (jazz, classical, and popular music).

The Archives' special collections continue to attract visiting researchers to campus. Michael Murphy (Wayne State University) conducted research for his dissertation on Detroit blues women using the Nelson George, Karen Shearer, Charles Sykes, and Portia Maultsby collections. Memphis writer Preston Lauterbach examined the collections of

Michael Lydon and Portia Maultsby for his forthcoming book *A Hundred Dollars Crooked: The Chitlin' Circuit and the Road to Rock-N-Roll*. Professor J. Andrew Flory (Shenandoah Conservatory, Virginia) researched the George and Maultsby collections for his forthcoming book *I Hear a Symphony: Listening to the Music of Motown*. Emily C. Morry (University of Rochester) conducted research for her dissertation, "I Too Sing America': The Sense of Place in African American Music, 1927-1992," using the Nelson George, Karen Shearer, Charles Sykes, Michael Lydon, William Barlow, Portia Maultsby, Smithsonian Black Radio, and Dayton Funk collections.

The staff of the AAAMC contributed to scholarly and service initiatives of national institutions and organizations as well as those at Indiana University. Head of Collections Brenda Nelson-Strauss was appointed director of the Library of Congress National Recorded Sound Preservation Plan (June 2009-June 2010) and she served as consultant for the Resources in American Music History II Project. Nelson-Strauss was also appointed chair of the Music Library Association's Black Music Roundtable and her chapter on "Religious Music" will appear in the Association's forthcoming *Basic Music Library* (4th ed.). At Indiana University, she is a member of the Archives and Special Collections Month Planning Committee, the Media Preservation Survey Taskforce, and the Wells Library Special Collections Group. Nelson-Strauss also edits the Archives' music review website *Black Grooves* (www.blackgrooves.org). We encourage your submission of materials for review and participation as reviewers of CDs, DVDs, and books.

Administrator/Project Manager Ronda Sewald is a member of the Association for Recorded Sound Collections' DACS for Archival Sound Recordings subcommittee and Travel Grant Award committee. She also serves as the discographer for the Society for Ethnomusicology and compiled the 2009 volume of the *Ethnomusicology* discography. At Indiana University, she is a member of the Encoded Archival Description Working Group



Dr. Portia Maulsby announces the start of the Saturday morning conference session with (left to right) Reebee Garofalo, Tamar-kali, Moe Mitchell, and Greg Tate.

and the Metadata Discussion Group. Sewald recently completed her Ph.D. dissertation, “The Darker Side of Sound: Conflicts over the Use of Soundscapes for Musical Performances” (Indiana University, 2009) and received her Ph.D. in Ethnomusicology.

In conjunction with the festival *Honor! Festival Celebrating American Cultural Legacy*, curated by Jessye Norman and presented by Carnegie Hall, I developed the content for the interactive website *History of African American Music* (www.carnegiehall.org/honor/history/index.aspx) and participated on two panels during the festival. I also presented the following papers:

- “Soul Power: James Brown, King Records and the Making of Modern African American Music.” Plenary Address for the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, Cincinnati, OH (October 2009).
- “Urban Voices of Protest: The Music of the 1960s and 1970s.” Four-person panel for “Music of the Movement:

A Sustaining Voice,” the culminating event of the year-long series, *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Remembrance and Reconciliation*, sponsored by the Maryland Humanities Council (November 17, 2009).

- “Fight the Power with Black Power: Black Music and Political/Social Activism in the 1960s and 1970s,” Denison University (January 2009).

My article, “Dayton Street Funk: The Layering of Multiple Identities,” appears in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology*, edited by Derek Scott (Ashgate Press, 2009).

I am pleased to announce the recent publication of the fourth book in the Black Music in Global Perspective book series published by the University of Illinois Press and edited by myself and Dr. Mellonee Burnim. Eileen M. Hayes’ *Songs in Black and Lavender: Race, Sexual Politics, and Women’s Music* (2010) draws upon fieldwork conducted at eight women’s music festivals. Hayes shows how studying these festivals—attended by predominately white lesbians—

provides critical insight into the role of music and lesbian community formation. With acuity and candor, Hayes, an ethnomusicologist and longtime feminist activist, elucidates why this music scene matters. AAAMC Advisory Board member Linda Tillery provides a foreword.

I close by introducing Regina Jones as the newest member of the AAAMC National Advisory Board. In 1966 Jones, along with her former husband Ken Jones, established and published the first national trade magazine on black popular music. *Soul* provided unprecedented national exposure to African American artists, which contributed to their popularity (see inside story). I met Jones in 1983 and she has been a major supporter of my collection initiatives in the area of black popular music. I welcome her to the Board and look forward to her continued contributions to the Archives.

Portia K. Maulsby

Featured Collection



Author Roni Sarig with son Uri Sarig and Andre Benjamin

Documenting the “Third Coast”: The Roni Sarig Collection

Journalist Roni Sarig recently donated to the AAAMC all of the interview recordings and secondary source materials used to craft his book, *Third Coast: OutKast, Timbaland and How Hip Hop Became a Southern Thing* (2007). *Third Coast* is one of the first monograph-length works on Southern (aka Dirty South) hip hop.¹ The collection comprises forty audio cassettes of interviews with some of the most important names in Southern rap such as Jermaine Dupri, DJ Paul, and the Clipse. Also included are facsimiles of magazine clippings, press releases, and other promotional items featuring Southern hip hop artists and music.

A native of Baltimore, Maryland, Roni Sarig became interested in writing at a very early age. After graduating from NYU with a degree in English, he worked for a time in New York, but his career really blossomed following a move to South Carolina. Soon Sarig’s music features were appearing in publications around the country such as *Rolling Stone*, *Vibe*, *XXL*, *Spin*, *The Village Voice*, *Interview*, and dozens of newspapers including *The New York Times*. Aside from *Third Coast*, Sarig has authored or co-authored several books including *The Secret History of Rock: The Most Influential Bands You’ve Never Heard Of* (1998), as well as practical manuals on bicycling and several books on Jewish family and classroom activities.

Sarig moved to Atlanta in September 1998 and became the music editor of *Creative Loafing*, the city’s premiere alternative newspaper. That very same month, OutKast’s landmark album,

Aquemini, was released. The critical and commercial buzz around *Aquemini* was one of the chief factors that spurred on the Atlanta and Southern rap scenes. Sarig found himself writing several small articles about the scene and became captivated by the stories. Southern rap was becoming a phenomenon worthy of exploration and Sarig, whose press credentials gave him a type of insider status, felt he had the ability and duty to share this story with the public. Thus he embarked on the project that eventually turned into *Third Coast*.

Using a cassette recorder, Sarig interviewed over eighty Southern rappers, DJs, producers, music industry executives, and journalists during 2004–2006. These tapes offer fascinating insight into the evolution of Southern hip hop. Particularly intriguing are DJ Ready Red’s story about the formation of the Geto Boys, The Clipse’s discourse on record label politics, and Crunchy Black’s

¹ For another monograph on Southern hip hop, see: Palmer, Tamara. 2005. *Country Fried Soul: Adventures in Dirty South Hip hop*. Backbeat Books.

tale of Three 6 Mafia's humble Memphis beginnings. For Sarig, the most compelling story is that of the Showboys, the New York-based rap group whose "Drag Rap" single laid the foundations for both New Orleans bounce and Memphis crunk.

After publishing *Third Coast* in 2007, Sarig felt he had accomplished everything he had wanted to as a writer and decided to take a break from the profession. For the last four years, he has taught high school journalism in Atlanta. Sarig sees his collection at the AAAMC as part of his legacy and hopes that it will aid future research into Southern hip hop culture.

To accompany this collection, the AAAMC embarked on a project to obtain prominent albums representing each Southern hip hop center. Bass classics such as 2 Live Crew's *As Nasty as They Wanna Be* and DJ Magic Mike's *Ain't No Doubt About It*, along with Poison Clan's *2 Low Life Muthas*, offer a glimpse into Florida hip hop. The Georgia series features such notable releases as OutKast's seminal *ATLiens* and Kilo's *America Has a Problem*. Louisiana is represented by a number of releases from the state's two historic hip hop labels, Cash Money and No Limit, including BG's *Chopper City* and Master P's *Ice Cream Man* along with classic bounce releases such as *It's Jimi* by DJ Jimi. Releases like the Geto Boys' *We Can't Be Stopped*, UGK's *Super Tight*, and DJ Screw's *All Work, No Play* compose the Texas collection. Notable Tennessee inclusions are *Comin' Out Hard* and *Mystic Stylez*, the debuts from Memphis artists 8Ball & MJG and Three 6 Mafia, respectively. Alabama's Rich Boy, North Carolina's Little Brother, and Mississippi's David Banner are among the other artists included in the AAAMC's Southern rap collection.

Although all of these albums were produced within the last twenty years, it soon became apparent that many of the local or regional classics are now out of print and that immediate action was necessary to preserve the rich legacy of Southern hip hop. With the Roni Sarig Collection and its accompanying Southern rap CD collection, the AAAMC has become a great resource for information and materials related to Southern hip hop music and culture.

— Langston Collin Wilkins,
AAAMC Graduate Assistant

In the Vault: Recent Donations

Roni Sarig Collection:

Interviews with Southern hip hop artists and research materials related to his book *Third Coast* (see feature article)

Michael Jackson Tributes:

Commemorative publications including magazines, press coverage, and televised memorial service

Linda Tillery:

Scrapbook and press materials documenting her career with The Loading Zone, Cultural Heritage Choir, and other groups; collection of rock and R&B LPs

Reclaiming the Right to Rock:

Conference videos, photos, interviews, programs, and press and research materials documenting the AAAMC's conference (see feature article)

Jared Nickerson:

Papers related to the Black Rock Coalition

Regina Jones:

Soul magazine series (see feature article)

James Spooner:

Materials and footage related to *Afro-Punk*

CD/DVD/Book Donors:

Anti	Heads Up	PRA
Bearin' Entertainment	Integrity	Rapster
Bear Family	Intercession	Sacks and Co.
Bill Carpenter	Jazz Promo	Secretly Canadian
Blind Raccoon	Cheryl Keyes	Shanachie
Blue Corn Music	Koch	Shore Fire
Bradley, Adam	Lawrence Hill Books	Smithsonian Folkways
Buda	Legacy	Sounds of Blackness
Canongate	Lewis, Ron	St. Martin's Press
CaseQuarter	Lex Records	Strut
Concord	Light in the Attic	Swift, Rob
Conqueroo	LiveWired Music	Tape Vault
Crossover	M.C. Records	Taseis Media Group
Deacon	Mahon, Maureen	Telarc
Delmark	Malaco	Thuglife Army
Divisible	Maultsby, Portia	Time Life Music
Dorian	Maynor, Kevin	Tompkins
Dust-to-Digital	Morry, Emily	Trafalgar Square
eByrd Communications	Mr. Wonderful	Tru Thoughts
EMI Gospel	Music World	Tyscot
Emusica	MVD	Universal
Fly South	Nature Sound	Vampisoul
Gold Dust	Nelson-Strauss, Brenda	Verity
Guerrilla Funk	Peak	Whitall, Susan
Harte Recordings	Penn, Ivan	Zomba

The AAAMC welcomes donations of photographs, film and video, sound recordings, music, and research materials on all aspects of African American music.

Regina Jones' Soul Legacy



Regina Jones at her desk, 1980.

On March 11, 1983, Dr. Portia K. Maultsby interviewed Regina Jones, owner of *Soul*, a groundbreaking magazine published in Los Angeles from 1966-1982. Their relationship continued over the years and Jones was invited to become a member of the AAAMC's National Advisory Board last year. Recently, Jones donated a nearly complete set of *Soul* to the AAAMC, and also established the SOUL Legacy Collection at UCLA. She is currently working to complete *The Jan Gaye Story*, a biography of Marvin Gaye's second wife, as well as *SOUL Remembers the Jackson Family*, a collection of stories about the Jacksons that appeared on the pages of *Soul* in the 1970s. What follows are excerpts from the 1983 interview about the historical importance of *Soul*.

Maultsby (PKM): What were the circumstances that led you to form the *Soul* publication?

Jones (RJ): My husband, Ken Jones, started it. There was an entertainment tabloid called *The Beat* and it was dedicated to white popular music. Ken thought there was a need to chronicle black music, so he patterned *Soul* after *The Beat*. The first issues of *Soul* were published out of *The Beat*'s offices. Ken was a radio news reporter and Cecil Tuck, the publisher and owner of *The Beat*, was also the KRLA news director and Ken's boss. When Ken started *Soul*, there was no coverage of black music, nowhere for new groups to get exposure. He had been in the news media for quite a few years and had written for newspapers, both white and black, and saw that it was necessary to fill this gap—to create some kind of instrument to cover news of black music. At that time, *Ebony* and *Jet* didn't pay attention to black music. If you were Harry Belafonte or Lena Horne maybe, but other than that, there were maybe little, tiny articles. That's how *Soul* started—as a local, Los Angeles, eight-page tabloid. The promotion idea was to associate it with the local radio station KGFJ . . . and we sold so many copies through the radio station that people thought KGFJ had started it when it was

actually an advertising exchange. We put the call letters KGFJ on the papers and had on-the-air radio advertising without having to pay for it. By the second year, there were radio partners in over 30 cities.

PKM: What was the artist response to the paper initially? What kind of cooperation did you get and how were you able to seek out interviews?

RJ: It was a great response, but there were hurdles. When we originally called to get material on black artists, there were no photos or biographies. Half the time there was little to no information. Record companies frequently didn't know how to reach the artist. It had not jelled like it has today. We wrote most of the original biographies on the artists or they were written by record company people at our request. They had to do it in order to produce what we wanted.

Motown, I think, was the most organized, but most of their set-up ran in conjunction with what we were requesting. We were making requests and they were working to try to fill our requests. We did a lot of interviews. It is my personal opinion that the entire public relations entity related to black music grew out of *Soul*'s needs and *Soul*'s requests. The PR departments got built, PR firms took on black account executives, and it grew and grew until it became a major business for a long period of time. That has now subsided; all of that black growth has died. *Soul* watched black music become a recognizable business and it grew to be a very financially rewarding business for a lot of people. But I think now that's all ended.

PKM: *Soul* magazine was first published in Los Angeles on April 14, 1966. That was a long time ago!

RJ: Yes. I remember driving down Central Avenue and at the corner of Imperial and Central,



Left to Right: Greg Phillinganes, Marlon Jackson, Quincy Jones, Regina Jones, and Michael Jackson; taken at the Hollywood Brown Derby at a Quincy party, March 1980.

stopping at a red light and looking over at a bus bench and this person was sitting there with *Soul* spread open. That was my first realization of what we had done. Before, it had just been an idea, the excitement of doing something new, and the work of pulling it together and getting it out. But when I actually saw this person who had gone to a store and paid money and bought a copy and was sitting there, intensely reading it, that was the reality. The dream had been realized and it was validated; someone really wanted it. That was much more stimulating, because it was written for the people. Yes, it was to chronicle black music, but if the people that we wanted to reach didn't see what they wanted—if *Soul* wasn't providing the need that we thought existed—then there was no purpose. We started getting letters from around the country, around the world during the Vietnam War. The soldiers over in Vietnam would send in letters. We had Soul Brother and Soul Sister sweatshirts. You'd get these three one-dollar bills (the cost of a one-year subscription) with dirt from Vietnam, some of it bloodstained money. It was really a whole emotional experience back then to know that your dream was really cared about. We even had the FBI come into the office one time. The agents wanted to know what this company was about, what was this "Soul Brother," because military people were wearing these sweatshirts. *Soul* really got off to a great beginning, and it was well received, and it fulfilled a need at that time and grew from there.

PKM: In 1966, Motown had most of the black roster, with Stax and Atlantic . . .

RJ: Motown was the most cooperative. Whereas other companies were incorporating and recording some records by black singers, Motown was a black record company devoted, just like we were, to black music.

PKM: At that time, they were in Detroit. So you were contacting companies all over the country?

RJ: Oh, yeah. I can remember my first experience going back to Motown, and how cooperative they were, and how well received I was. I mean, they really wanted to work with us and assist us. Berry Gordy was very cooperative. If you look in old volumes [of *Soul*] you'll see where he was on the road a lot of the time with the Supremes and other groups, and he would always cooperate; anything we wanted—questions answered, pictures, anything we wanted we got. They understood the need for *Soul* magazine and they supported us from day one.

There was also Chess Records back at that time in Chicago. It was the same kind of reaction there. Atlantic was responsive. James Brown—anything you wanted, you had it. He was always very cooperative and he was a man that not only contributed his time, but he would spend the money to be supportive, to encourage. I've had personal experiences with James, and financially—when he was at his prime making money—if you were a struggling black artist, he'd reach in his pocket and buy you a ticket, or hand you the money. This is the kind of response he had with *Soul*. He bought advertising and he spent money with *Soul* to help make sure that we would continue. And this was rare, because although most of the people wanted to cooperate on a publicity level, on an economic level they did not want to reach in their pockets and spend money.

PKM: What was the cooperation/reaction from white companies, like Capitol, CBS, RCA?

RJ: Primarily ignorance, lack of understanding. We're talking about the '60s, so black was just something they did not know about. I was very fortunate at Capitol Records. There was a woman there, Joyce



Miller, who at the time was the first black promotions woman in the country who worked for Capitol Records, and this was a very prestigious position. She worked with *Soul* because she saw the need, and it helped her do her job, so she really fought with her company to get their support.

I mean it was a fight—it was a fight every step of the way, but it was an educational fight. If there was racism there, I don't really choose to comment on it, but it was more of a case of ignorance, 'cause to me that's what racism and race problems are about. But there was a lot of ignorance; I mean tremendous amounts of ignorance. The black performer wasn't thought of as a person. We had to literally develop the understanding that black artists have to be promoted just like other artists.

The thing is though, there were more experts on black music that we ran into who were white. Our first editors were white; the people that were willing to come and work, to do the writing—these were white girls, primarily. In retrospect, that is very sad to me, but it's a fact. They wanted to be in editorial, they liked the music, and many of them were working for *The Beat*, so they already knew how to put out a tabloid. They just started helping us and next thing we knew, when we decided to break away, they came with us. Carol Deck was the editor for quite some period of time. The second editor was another white girl, Rochelle Reed, [as was] one of our mainstay writers, Nikki Wine. We had to go out and cover events and they would have to go into a black club, and at first they were very comfortable doing it. But then the racial issues started and they became very uncomfortable and

didn't feel safe. But at first there were no problems. We also became more radical in our thinking—we wanted black editors, black writers—so *Soul* actually went through a transition from just featuring good black music for people who liked music, to being about black music for black people. We went through the same changes that the country went through.

PKM: You hired black editors and writers later?

RJ: Yes, more and more we'd seek them out, though the ones that seemed to have the most knowledge were too often still white. I mean it saddens me to this day when I think about it, because the most in-depth record collections that we would run into primarily were all [owned by] whites. It could be about economics again. A young man named Ron Baron just loved and worshipped black music and got very involved. He ended up being very successful as the years progressed, doing public relations for black music. There were whites like this that were willing to work for nothing—ten cents a story, or a line or whatever.

I remember one of the most exciting times of my life was when we came out with *Soul Illustrated*, which must've been in '68. I was up in New York at Caroline Franklin's (Aretha's sister's) apartment, and Lonnie Elder (author of the play *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*) was there and offered to write for *Soul Illustrated*. Lonnie was the first prestigious black writer to just say, "Hey, what can I do?" I mean, we were just ecstatic to have someone of his stature recognize what we were trying to do and be willing to work with us and give us his input. Our first photographer was Howard Bingham, who became Muhammad Ali's personal photographer and Bill Cosby's personal photographer. Howard Bingham is a celebrity, one of the first national black photographers of entertainment that I know of.

PKM: Generally your efforts with *Soul* began to make inroads in the white corporate structure as they became aware of advertising opportunities, which is something they obviously hadn't done. If they didn't have bios on black artists, they weren't advertising. So basically they were manufacturing records and sending them into black communities. If they sold, fine; if they didn't, fine. If they had a superstar, as seen through white eyes, like Johnny Mathis, or someone like that, then he would probably have a bio.

RJ: That's right.

PKM: *Soul* magazine preceded each of those English publications on black music.

RJ: Yes. We also preceded *Rolling Stone*—it was

patterned exactly like what we were doing. In the early days when *Rolling Stone* started, just about everything they said or did about black music used *Soul* for historical research, and we were constantly quoted in their early issues. When *Look* magazine did their big story on James Brown, the writer spent weeks up in our office going through material. Many things like that happened in those early days, because *Soul* was the first [to cover black music]. It was a real strange feeling. We knew we were the authority, yet we also knew how much we didn't know. This would often leave us wondering, "Oh, God, you mean there really is nothing else?" I mean, even now it's really hard for me to believe that there was nothing else. How could it be that out here in L.A. we began something so significant when you've got so much black energy in the East, so many more people? But there was nothing similar to my knowledge.

PKM: In getting the magazine on the market, how did you know where to put the paper? Did you distribute in black communities?

RJ: All trial and error. When we started, we tried to find out how to get it out, and there was one guy, Frank Diskin, who did some magazine distribution of *Ebony* and *Jet* in South L.A., which was the black area. Diskin had an egg stand at 116th and Broadway, an old truck, and he sold eggs. Once a week he went around and delivered *Jet* and once a month, *Ebony*, to liquor stores and small markets. We had to beg Frank. We spent lots of time telling him how *Soul* was gonna make it and, "you really got to do it." We spent weeks talking to him about it. Finally, he said, "Ok," and he was shocked, because as soon as *Soul* hit the newsstands it sold like wild cakes. It was unbelievable, just really unbelievable. I don't remember what our first run was, but with the next issue we had to print more papers. It just grew—the people were hungry for it, and they just grabbed it. I mean, it grew so much that Frank gave up his egg stand in a very short period of time, and became the largest distributor in the black community.

PKM: He's black?

RJ: No, a Jewish guy. His business, his whole life changed, because of *Soul*. He had been doing *Jet* and *Ebony* for years, but when *Soul* came we completely disrupted Frank's life. There was not much else he could do, 'cause we were coming out once a week. The money that would come in from the people, the subscriptions, I mean it was overwhelming, even to us. Dollars, quarters, nickels, dimes, but it was just—it was fantastic. The second time I saw that in *Soul's* history was when we came to the conclusion that the Jackson 5 were gonna be it. We decided to do a series of issues and we put them on the cover and it was

the same response. Motown didn't know they were going to be as big as they were so quickly. I mean, the response was unbelievable, all over the country. The papers were selling out and we had to reprint. The volume of mail was unbelievable. It was coming from everywhere. People heard they could read about the group in *Soul* and they were sending fifty cents, I think it was, per issue. I mean, there would be just hundreds of dollars of quarters everyday to deposit and the mailman was coming in with big bags, like you see in old movies.

PKM: How did artists feel about the magazine?

RJ: They loved it. They were supportive of it; they liked to be featured in it. In the early days, we could reach any black entertainer in the country any time we wanted to, because we were the only place for them to go. That changed quickly as the music industry grew and changed, and as the other periodicals came up. They quickly forgot. When they got big, they no longer cared about wanting to be in *Soul* magazine; next they wanted to be in *Ebony* when *Ebony* finally deemed that it was financially rewarding to do stories and put a black entertainer on the cover. That was their dream and desire. Then many of them surpassed their desire for *Ebony*; they wanted in *Rolling Stone*, or to be recognized by the white press. Public relations firms that had grown out of the need to be there for black music would even tell their artist that "You don't really need *Soul*." There was disrespect that started to grow, all kinds of very negative feelings. There was a total disrespect of black media, not just *Soul*. I would hear this from writers all over the country. Because the desire was to get into the white periodicals and that was it. For black periodicals, they would throw them a bio, or throw them a canned story. *Soul* would never go along with that. If we couldn't sit one-on-one with the artist and do a story, we just would not do it. We held firm to our mission.

PKM: What led to the defunct status of *Soul*?

RJ: *Soul* started to die years ago when there was no longer a need for a specialized black music publication. Black people no longer wanted to read just about black music. Many started buying white records and wanted to read about white artists. We tried incorporating white artists that were selling in the black market, and we got tremendous response from that, but we also received hate mail. *Soul* outlived its usefulness. I mean *Soul* needed some radical changes, and we were not able keep up with and ahead of the changing times. There were not enough new creative ideas. We never had a financial footing and sixteen years was a long time for an unfinanced startup business to survive. That's what happened.

Reclaiming the Right to Rock

A Conference on Black Experiences in Rock Music



Saturday afternoon session with (left to right) Mauren Mahon, Suzanne Thomas, Netic, Kamara Thomas, and Rob Fields.



Photo of main exhibit case by Anna Batcheller.

On November 13-14, 2009, the AAAMC hosted a two-day conference in Indiana University's Neal-Marshall Black Culture Center. Entitled *Reclaiming the Right to Rock: Black Experiences in Rock Music*, the conference brought together black rock musicians from different generations and regions with music critics and scholars to discuss the socio-political history, musical developments, and the future of black rock.

The idea for the conference began as a discussion between Director Portia Maulsby and Maureen Mahon, Associate Professor of Music at New York University and author of the book *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Duke University Press, 2004). In her book, Mahon addresses a number of issues faced by black rock musicians including the lack of support from African American audiences, the (mis)conception of rock as white music, the racism and stereotypes inherent in the music

industry, and the appropriation of black music by white artists. Founded in 1985 by Vernon Reid, Greg Tate, and Konda Mason, the Black Rock Coalition (BRC) serves as a support network and sounding board for black rockers looking to fight the system. The BRC is now celebrating its 25th anniversary and has over 3,000 names on its mailing list.

Although a number of black artists have recently released successful rock albums, including TV on the Radio and Santigold, many others still face the same difficulties initially addressed by BRC members in the '80s. Furthermore, despite their roles as innovators and contributors to rock music, most black rockers continue to fall well below the radar of scholars, libraries, and archives.

Seeking to address both of these issues, Maulsby was inspired to host a conference that would bring together a diverse range of voices and perspectives. The AAAMC flew in thirteen panelists and moderators from across the country and Europe

to participate in three discussion sessions. In addition to Mahon, these panelists included the following musicians, scholars, and critics:

Session I:

“What Is Rock: Definition and Roots”

- **Kandia Crazy Horse** – Rock critic, former Senior Associate Editor for *The Village Voice*, and author of *Rip It Up: The Black Music Experience in Rock ‘n’ Roll* (2004);
- **Stew** – Singer, songwriter, and guitarist for Stew and The Negro Problem; performer, composer, and book writer for Tony Award-winning musical *Passing Strange*;
- **Ike Willis** – Former lead singer and rhythm guitarist for Frank Zappa;
- **Andy Hollinden** (moderator) – Senior Lecturer, IU Jacobs School of Music, as well as a producer, composer, and performer with numerous rock bands.

Session II:

“The Politics of Rock: Race, Class, Gender, Generation”

- **Tamar-kali** – Hardcore songwriter, vocalist, and guitarist;
- **Moe Mitchell** – Lead singer for CIPHER;
- **Greg Tate** – Essayist and staff writer for *The Village Voice*, founding member of the BRC, and conductor and music director for Burnt Sugar;
- **Linda Tillery** – Founder and leader of The Cultural Heritage Choir, former lead singer for The Loading Zone, and a producer and percussionist for numerous musical groups;
- **Reebee Garofalo** (moderator) – Professor at the College of Public and Community Service at UMass Boston and author of *Rockin’ Out: Popular Music in the USA* (4th ed., 2008).

Session 3:

“Face of Rock in the 21st Century”

- **Rob Fields** – Self-described “black rock evangelist” and author of the BoldAsLove.com black rock blog;
- **Netic** – Lead vocalist/MC for Game Rebellion;

- **Kamara Thomas** – Singer, songwriter, bassist, and guitarist for Earl Greyhound and Ghost Gamblers;
- **Suzanne Thomas** – Guitarist, singer, and songwriter for Suzanne & The Blues Church;
- **Maureen Mahon** (moderator).

The conference was partially supported by IU’s New Frontiers Program, which is funded by the Lilly Endowment and administered by the Office of the Vice Provost for research. The New Frontiers grant was also used to create an exhibit documenting the role of black artists in rock music from its inception in blues, through the indelible impact of Jimi Hendrix, and on into the current work of our panelists. Featuring LPs, CDs, photographs, flyers, posters, and other promotional materials from the AAAMC’s collections, the exhibit was co-curated by Brenda Nelson-Strauss and Langston Wilkins, with additional assistance from Ann Shaffer. The exhibit was on display in the Bridgwaters Lounge of the Neal-Marshall Black Culture Center from Oct. 19-Nov. 20, 2009.

In addition to the New Frontiers grant, the AAAMC received financial and in-kind support from twenty-four sponsors and collaborators (see p. 15 for full list of events and sponsors) and nearly forty volunteers. Through the support of these institutions and individuals, the Bloomington campus played host to ten events including film screenings, lectures, workshops, and a Saturday evening rock conference in addition to the three panels and the exhibit funded by the New Frontiers grant.

Although organizing and hosting the conference and coordinating nine days of conference-related events proved to be a challenging project in and of itself, Maultsby also wanted to ensure that this historic series of events and the thoughts and experiences of the panelists were well-documented. A professional film crew was hired to videotape the three sessions plus a one-on-one interview with each panelist. The crew also filmed a two-hour Union Board concert featuring the IU Soul Revue,

Suzanne & The Blues Church, and Tamar-kali.

The documentation of these events, as well as audience interviews and backstage recordings made by over a dozen volunteers, was coordinated by Mike McAlpin. McAlpin currently serves as the Director of Media Relations for Saint Mary’s College of California and has had a distinguished and award-winning career as a broadcast television producer and journalist. Among his accolades are an Emmy Award, multiple Emmy Award nominations, and the Nieman Fellowship for Journalism at Harvard University. IU graduate student Jessie Wallner assisted McAlpin with the coordination of the volunteer videographers and photographers. Equipment for the volunteer documentation efforts was supplied by IU’s Sound and Video Analysis & Instruction Lab (SAVAIL).

The conference also provided IU students in Folklore and Ethnomusicology, Telecommunications, and Journalism with a hands-on opportunity to practice their trades. Supplemental audio documentation was recorded by students enrolled in Paul Mahern’s Audio Production course and used in the creation of their final podcast projects. Student members of the IU Chapter of the National Association for Black Journalists and several IU Journalism courses provided coverage of the conference and conference-related events (see next article for more details).

The end result is nearly a terabyte (1,000 gigabytes) of audio, video, and image files for use in classroom projects and the creation of educational products such as podcasts and instructional websites. Along with the materials collected for the creation of the exhibit and donations received from a number of the panelists, this data will serve as the core of the AAAMC’s new black rock collection, which we will continue to build and expand upon for years to come.

— Ronda L. Sewald



Reclaiming the Right to Rock – Student Coverage

Friday afternoon session with (left to right) Andy Hollinden, Ike Willis, Kandia Crazy Horse, and Stew.

As part of our mission for the conference, the AAAMC sought to give IU students practical hands-on experience with documenting live events. We've selected two exceptional articles to feature in this year's issue. The first article presents Lorin Williams' reactions to the first and third conference sessions. Williams reflects on how his personal background and experiences have shaped his perceptions of black musicians in rock music. The second article by Melody Barham summarizes a classroom lecture presented by Suzanne Thomas for Dr. Mellonee Burnim's course "From Juke Joint to Choir Loft: Sacred vs. Secular in African American Music."

Paul Mahern's Audio Production course, offered by IU's Department of Telecommunications, provided additional coverage. Jordan Kilpin created an excellent podcast, which was aired as part of "Artworks," a weekly arts and culture program on WFIU student radio. This podcast is available at: <http://indianapublicmedia.org/artworks/10-04/>.

Black Rock Conference Story/Reflection

I consider myself music literate. Having an appreciation for music from the past and present, I'm able to recall information and facts on the go, stumping my friends with how much I know. You could say I'm a little obsessed with knowing little tidbits like that. I'm the guy who buys the album just to read the liner notes. I guess it's the inquiring journalist in me. I felt confident in this talent until the black rock conference. I realized there was an entire world of African American culture that I had been directly, and indirectly, dismissed from experiencing.

I'll admit that my ignorance of Blacks' contributions to rock music is partially attributed to my lack of research. I was born in 1987, a year before the heralded "Golden Age of Hip Hop" and the pop vibes of new jack swing. By then, rock music had

been visually associated with great white artists and an even greater white audience. MTV had only recently introduced black artists to their regular programmed lineup, and they were mostly relegated to traditionally black music genres: contemporary R&B, rap, funk, reggae, hip hop, etc. Even today, you rarely see a black man with a guitar unless it's Lenny Kravitz, Prince, or if you're watching a different channel altogether.

And if I thought these indirect influences were strong, then the direct influences in my own household were stronger. My parents were both born in the 1950s, which meant they would have grown up with the soulful pop of the '60s and the far-out funk of the '70s. My mother rarely strayed from the urban lane. Growing up in East Chicago, Indiana, to parents of Mississippian roots, she identified most with the jazz and gospel sounds. Even to this day, she prefers music of a mellow tempo, unless of course it involves reliving the days of *Soul Train*. My father experimented more

than my mother, enjoying Hendrix and Tower of Power just as much as George Clinton and George Duke. By the time I came around, they were in their early thirties and had graduated to contemporary R&B and jazz, and the old-school songs of the period.

So naturally I gravitated to the sounds and looks that mirrored my image, my environment. I segregated myself from black rock as something different. Oddly enough, I had no problem singing along with The Knack's "My Sharona," or Alanis Morissette's "Uninvited," but let an African American grip a guitar and pull the same pop/rock grit and I changed the station. I had fallen victim to the same prejudice people felt toward R&B or rap. I didn't understand, therefore I feared. And my fears begot judgment. I see now that knowing this history and embracing my inner Afro-punk, if it exists, is as much a part of my history as it is anyone else's. Just being in the same room as these rock music pioneers cemented the idea that music is beyond the confines critics and audiences place it in.

For two days, two hours each, I felt as if I was walking through history, a witness to history in the making. Two sessions taught me where we have come from, and where we could be headed. The first session concentrated on the origins of rock and roll, and how through time the "roll" was left out," as Ike Willis said. The lead singer and guitarist for Frank Zappa spoke of the criticism he received as a black kid growing up who wanted to play the guitar. Willis said people just didn't feel comfortable with him "playin' that crazy white boy shit." He honestly felt music is too important to be "labeled" and "categorized into a lump."

Another panelist, music critic and Black Crowes-fanatic, Kandia Crazy Horse, spoke about how being born after Jimi Hendrix really segregated her from the black rock sound; or the rock sound in general. She spoke very insightfully on how people believed the '70s was this liberated and post-

Civil Rights, post-racism era in music, when in reality the music industry was becoming more and more segregated. You had *American Bandstand* and *Soul Train*; two shows which blatantly targeted two separate audiences.

"Why are we scared of this sound?" she asked. She remembered growing up in the South, and how the same instruments and riffs that were used in Sunday morning worship were forces of evil once they were used in a secular sense. The same accusations were made about jazz in the 1920s, before whites coined that as their own too, for a profit.

I was most amazed by the panelists' vast knowledge of the art they love so much. Stew, the Tony Award-winning director of Broadway's *Passing Strange*, deconstructed the truth behind The Beatles success: they wanted to sound like Little Richard. It was as if a light had come on. The "Tutti-Frutti" singer had been telling the truth all these years! But really, he simplified his point by saying, "That's the way art works; you try, you fail, and it turns into something else." I had been schooled.

Whereas the first session taught me a lot, the third session reinforced some preconceived ideas about the present state of music. The panel had a variety of people: blues guitarist Suzanne Thomas, hip hop/rock singer Netic of Game Rebellion, rock artist Kamara Thomas, and self-described black rock evangelist Rob Fields. Their discussion examined the face of black rock music in the 21st century.

What attendees got was essentially a generational battle between a black rock artist and a businessman who rocks. The debate became heated when the topic of educating the youth came about. Suzanne Thomas believed she had a responsibility to reclaim the right to rock, not just for her, but for the generations to come. In the opposite corner, Netic spoke of how he didn't feel obligated to reclaim anything, and didn't think it was appropriate to force anyone to do anything. Somewhere along the line, Lil' Wayne's name came up in the

discussion.

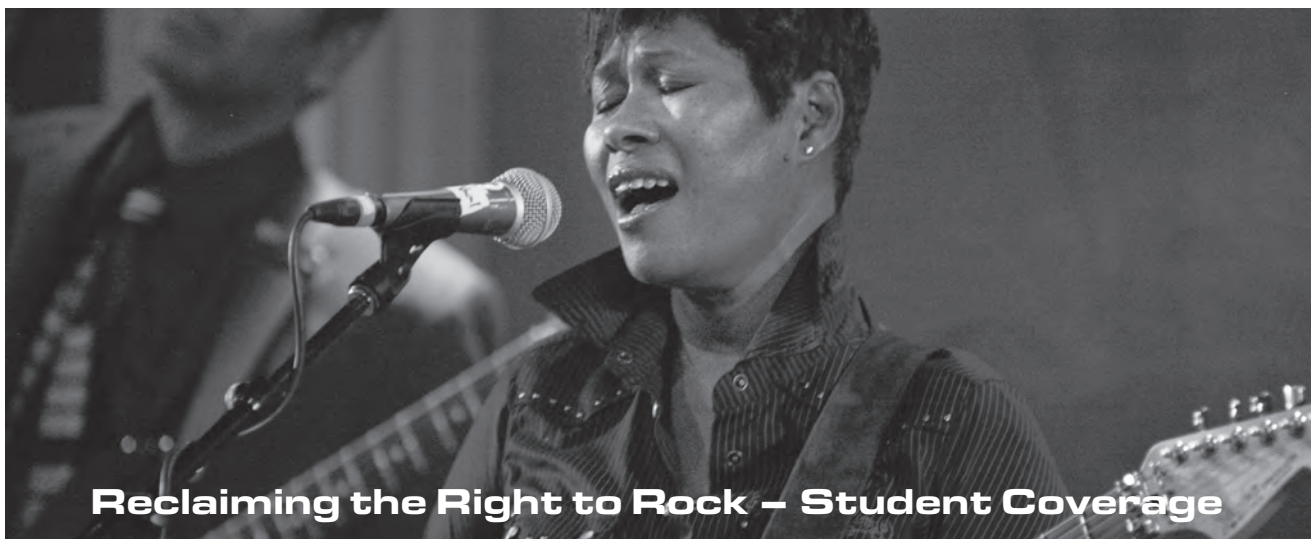
If you don't know, Lil' Wayne (aka Dwayne Carter) is a multimillion dollar hip hop artist who decided he wanted to venture out artistically and ho a rock album. While Netic talked of how Wayne would win based on his sense of drive, and not on talent, everyone else saw a deeper issue residing underneath. Personally, I had to disagree with Netic. Yes, hip hop is pulling inspiration from different genres due partly to OutKast, Kanye West, and other artists. But one can tell a genuine interest in variation apart from someone trying to bank on a fad. Kanye makes it plain in a verse on Consequence's "Whatever U Want:" "Now as soon as I change up / Everybody else tryna step they game up / wont they, don't they, will they, nah."

Who is to say what hip hop is supposed to look, sound, or feel like? Who is to say what black music can or cannot become? This is the lesson I learned from the experience: black rock is R&B, soul, hip hop, pop, funk, jazz, gospel, and whatever comes next. It is up to us to progressively change our outlook. And we will do more than reclaim the right to rock: we will redefine it on our own terms.



— Lorin Williams

Williams is a student in Indiana University's School of Journalism. In addition to serving as a member of the IU Chapter of the National Association of Black Journalists, he served several years as the Entertainment editor for *Arbutus*, the Indiana University yearbook.



Reclaiming the Right to Rock – Student Coverage

“21st Century Bluesman”: Suzanne Thomas

On Friday, November 13, 2009, Suzanne Thomas presented a lecture entitled, “From Choir Lofts to Juke Joints.” As implied by the title and the name of her band, “Suzanne & The Blues Church,” Thomas is adamant about the desegregation of sacred and secular music, as they both bear a reciprocally seminal influence upon each other. Furthermore, Thomas feels that artists who perform African American sacred and secular music should not be belittled for doing so simultaneously.

In her presentation, Thomas expounded upon the lives and experiences of several black musicians—namely Eddie “Son House” James, Reverend Gary Davis, Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, Aretha Franklin, and herself—in order to further qualify and allow those attending the lecture to more easily comprehend her argument. In a personal commentary on her involvement in both sacred and secular music, she shared, “In being a musician, I’ve written some songs that I’ll probably burn for!” which she says probably can’t even be played on the radio, “but on the other hand, I have written some gospel,” which she defines as undeniably “straight out of the church.”

Regarding Ray Charles, she commented that, “You can hear the

influence [of the church] in his music a lot, especially, you know, when it’s really jumping... That’s all gospel!” She went on to say that many genres are presented as some other sort of soulful music (i.e., jazz, “country blues”), but all find their true foundations in gospel music.

The lecture was largely attended by students from Dr. Mellonee Burnim’s “Juke Joint to Choir Loft” class, wherein the class engaged in discourse regarding the role of the body in African American sacred and secular music. In relaying her own encounters with objectification within the music industry, Thomas stated, “Whenever a man would come for an audition, people would assume he could play, but when I came in, the first question they asked was ‘How does she look?’”

Throughout her career, Thomas has often been confronted by the expectation upon women to achieve fame by compromising musical excellence for sex appeal. Even in an audition for popular artist Beyoncé Knowles, Thomas stated that she was pejoratively regarded as a “real musician,” and was thus rejected due to the possibility that her “chops” (guitar playing) could have deflected attention from the main attraction.

Without regard to the many obstacles which have often confronted her, Thomas continues to utilize music as her vehicle for expression. She calls herself a “21st century bluesman,” in that she doesn’t just play her “daddy’s blues;” rather, her music bears relevance to the trials and issues that face 21st century

Americans. While Thomas plays the blues, she shared that her music has often been described as having hints of rock influence, to which she responds, “Why wouldn’t it, since rock came from the blues?”

From the instrumental composition of her band—which includes a Hammond B3 organ, guitar, and sometimes a piano—to the presentation of this lecture, Thomas serves as a perpetuator of culture and an educator within the black community. By providing the lecture attendees with further insight into her experiences in crossing and combining genre-based barriers, she encourages everyone to look at music historically in order to understand its roots, and to take the initiative to determine what we will teach to future generations.



—Melody Barham

Barham is majoring in Ethnomusicology and African American and African Diaspora Studies at Indiana University.



James Spooner, director and co-producer of *Afro-Punk*. Photo by Mike Lee.

Conference Related Events:

Oct. 19-Nov. 20, 2009

- Exhibit - *Reclaiming the Right to Rock: Black Experiences in Rock Music*

Friday, Nov. 6, 2009

- Film Screening of *White Lies, Black Sheep*, directed by James Spooner

Wednesday, Nov. 11, 2009

- Film Screening of *Passing Strange* followed by Q&A with Stew

Thursday, Nov. 12, 2009

- Presentation by Stew on his Broadway musical *Passing Strange*
- Dinner/Discussion with Kandia Crazy Horse and Kamara Thomas
- Workshop/Demonstration on Negro spirituals by Linda Tillery
- Lecture/Workshop by Ike Willis

Friday, Nov. 13, 2009

- Lecture by Suzanne Thomas to Professor Mellonee Burnim's class "From Juke Joint to Choir Loft"
- Luncheon Talk Series, "Who Are Asian Pacific Americans?" featuring Suzanne Thomas
- Film screening of *Afro-Punk* followed by Q&A session with director and co-producer James Spooner

Saturday, Nov. 14, 2009

- Union Board Concert featuring IU Soul Revue, Suzanne & The Blues Church, and Tamar-kali

For a more detailed description of these events, visit <http://www.indiana.edu/~aaamc/br/relatedevents.html>

Conference Sponsors and Collaborators:

New Frontiers Program, Office of the Vice Provost for Research, Office of the Provost, Themester @ The College of Arts and Sciences Program, Indiana Memorial Union Board; Depts. of Theatre and Drama, Folklore and Ethnomusicology, Telecommunications, Gender Studies, Communication and Culture, African American and African Diaspora Studies; Neal-Marshall Black Culture Center, Black Film Center/Archive, Hutton Honors College, Wells Scholars Program, City Lights & Underground Experimental Film Series, Foster International Living-Learning Center, Collins Living-Learning Center, IU Asian Culture Center, Asian American Studies Program, African American Arts Institute, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. – Gamma Eta Chapter, Vance Music Center, Office for Women's Affairs, Latino Studies Program, School of Journalism, Jacobs School of Music



In Their Own Words:

Prior to the start of the AAAMC's conference, our moderators had an opportunity to interview twelve of our panelists. Although space prohibits our publication of all twelve interviews, what follows are excerpts from those with Stew, Ike Willis, Earl Douglas, Jr., and Tamar-kali.

Andy Hollinden conducted the interviews with Ike Willis and Stew on Nov. 12, 2009. Hollinden teaches courses on the history of blues, rock, Frank Zappa, and the music of Jimi Hendrix at IU's Jacobs School of Music. In addition to his teaching duties, Hollinden composes and produces music for videos and has performed and recorded with numerous rock bands. Hollinden has also written and produced seven CDs of his own music, including his 2008 release, *Grieve for the Living*.

Professor Reebee Garofalo conducted interviews with Earl Douglas, Jr. and Tamar-kali on Nov. 13 and 14. Since 1978, Garofalo has taught at UMass Boston, where he is affiliated with the College of Public and Community Service and the American Studies Program. He has written numerous articles on copyright, digital downloading, racism, censorship, the political uses of music, and the globalization of the music industry for popular as well as scholarly publications and has lectured internationally on a broad range of subjects relating to the operations of the music industry. His most recent book is *Rockin' Out: Popular Music in the USA* (4th ed., 2008).

For those interested in hearing more from our panelists, the complete transcripts and videos for all twelve interviews are available at the AAAMC. Please, contact our staff for more details.



Stew is the founder of the band The Negro Problem and co-writer, composer, and performer for the Tony award-winning Broadway musical Passing Strange. In this interview, Stew talked at length about growing up in Los Angeles in the 1960s and '70s, his early influences from listening to British Invasion rock groups and American R&B on the radio, and his own formative experiences as a rock musician.

Andy Hollinden (AH): How has rock music affected your perceptions as a musician and your tastes in music?

Stew (S): Well, in my play *Passing Strange*, the character who we call Youth is a black rock musician. The first thing anywhere close to oppression he experiences about the music he makes is from his family. There are no white people that approach this black man and say, "You can't play rock music." It is actually his family. It is his community. It is the church people, and he sort of feels like, "Hey wait! I can claim this. This is mine actually." So his confusion, and to this day my confusion, is "what is the relationship between the music black rock musicians are making and their community?" That is the interesting relationship.

To me, if there is any kind of exclusion perceived among black rock musicians, if they are not getting their due, they can't really go to white people with this issue. White people singlehandedly kept blues musicians alive from the '60s to the '70s until now. The black community was not in that audience. They were not supporting blues music. There is something within the black community that somehow does not allow it to embrace black rock music and that to me is really the

only question. I can guess the question this whole conference should be about. If we are talking about reclaiming the right to rock, it is not about the musicians reclaiming it. We have always had the right. When is the audience, the black audience, going to reclaim the right to appreciate rock? And why don't they? Is it a class thing? I remember black people being ashamed of blues, for instance. I remember asking my grandmother about blues and it was sort of like it was punk rock. Blues was like the punk rock of her day. Those were the bad boys. They did not go to church. They came into town on weekends. They played juke joints. They messed around with some girls and then they left and they drank too much. And the way she described them, I was like, "Oh yeah, that is like punk rock." It sounded like the Sex Pistols were coming to town, only it was some blues cat. So the question is really: What is up with the black community? What is up with rock music? Why are they not accepting it?

AH: What are the factors that you think have led to this situation? Is it because the industry guided it there? Or maybe the black community just lost interest?

S: When it comes to music, I don't think you can blame anybody for perception issues. It all comes down to art, artist, and audience, especially in these times. In the '60s and '70s, I don't think there was any sort of big brother that was framing black rock music in any particular way to make black people not be into it. There is something about the music and the community that for some reason doesn't mesh. And I think there are tons of reasons. I think one thing

we have to address is that the black community does have very seriously deep, conservative aspects. I am not talking about politically conservative, I mean conservative. I mean dressing for dinner conservative. You know what I mean? I had a grandmother who liked you to dress for dinner. That is not Republican. That is conservative. Your hair has got to be right. If you are going to church, you are not wearing that. And the shirt you wear and the hair you have got and the car you are in and all these kind of values—you know black people are conservative. I don't care if they vote Democratic.

AH: And how would this affect the perception of music in the music industry?

S: In 1967 maybe you are busy trying to be upwardly mobile and not to draw attention to yourself. Then you have a guy that looks like Jimi Hendrix and sounds like Jimi Hendrix. He is sort of like the weird cousin who you kind of hope nobody actually associates you with, right? Never mind that he is a genius. But Hendrix and people like Hendrix—black ex-patriot jazz musicians—went to Europe. Hendrix had to go to England in order to get appreciated. There is something about a guy like him who is way out of his time, I guess, but in the same way completely rooted in blues.

I think for the upwardly mobile but conservative black person, they look at him as drawing too much attention to himself—the very same reason why hip hop [is rejected by] the black middle class community. I was just talking to a student here who is working in this area and who said because of guys like Jay-Z, hip hop is becoming acceptable in the black middle class because he represents upwardly mobile capitalist values. But the hip hop of the '80s and the '90s is more radical, more ghetto-oriented. Black middle class people did not like that music. So I am saying in the black community there is a deeply conservative streak that probably grew out of this idea of “Let's not distract from the issue. We just want to own homes, send our kids to college, and be like everybody else and don't make too much noise.” And then there are the noisemakers over there that are saying, “No, there is something else going on.”

AH: My experience, and I know you are from the same time period, was in being from dinky town, southern Indiana. My perception of Jimi Hendrix, seeing a guy that freaky who conservative people did not like, was “This is the coolest guy in the world.”

S: Exactly. Of course, of course.

AH: Do you think this is partly why he is accepted more by the white audience than the black audience? That white people looked at him and were like, “Oh my God, the freak of this guy ...” You said it was partly [due to his] music, but I would like to think [it was]

partly his genius.

S: Yes, but I think there is this odd thing that happens with race and culture in America where sometimes another culture can see something that the culture that created this music cannot see. And I think there is something very compelling and interesting about the way white audiences embrace the blues, for instance. Particularly the blues resurgence of the late 1950s and '60s, when some of these [musicians] were touring everywhere. [Promoters] found these guys sitting around down South and suddenly put them on the road, and this influenced British music—the blues-based British rock music. But there is something very compelling [about the fact that] the white community did that. You could write books galore about that, the psychological aspects.... The fact of the matter is the black community did not say, “Hey, these blues guys are treasures. Let's support them to keep them alive.” Quite the opposite, in fact—they separated themselves from them. They said, “I live in Chicago, I live in New York. I don't live in Georgia. I don't have anything to do with that. That is my grandfather. I have nothing to do with that world anymore. That is unsophisticated, backwards.” Backwards was a big word back then—“backwards, unsophisticated music that I will have nothing to do with it.”

AH: Now you mentioned that one race can make Americans appreciate things about the other race in a way that is just phenomenal. Would you say the same thing could be applied at a global level to [the way] people in Europe, for example, look at Americans?

S: Oh, there is no question. My play, *Passing Strange*, deals with that a lot. The lead in this play goes to Amsterdam and Berlin and to a great extent he gets objectified by the people because he becomes this symbol, this thing that they are completely fascinated with. This is still the Wild West for a lot of Europeans, and in everything that those two words connote. It is still fantasyland for a lot of them. And quite frankly, as much as it sucks to be objectified, there are also advantages if you are an artist trying to fill a club in Paris and you are a jazz musician from New York.

We are always looking at art and going, “Hmm, what does this tell me about the person who made it? What does it tell me about that world?” So a lot of it is anthropological to begin with, but to me there is a really, really healthy aspect to this. It is curiosity. To me, Americans are not curious enough. The thing I love most about Europeans is that they are curious. They want to know where stuff comes from and why it sounds like this. So that is why they pack clubs to capacity when a black musician plays there. [That same musician] may not be able to draw thirty people in New York. He will pack a club in Paris because they want to know about his [music] and where it comes from.

AH: So if I am hearing you correctly, if you can take race issues off the table, then this curiosity is freed?

S: Absolutely yes. I think for me, the basis of everything that I do is because I am fascinated by music. I am excited by it and I want to know more about it.... When a band like Public Enemy (I spoke with Chuck D about this) came to Paris or Berlin, they had guys quoting their lyrics back to them and analyzing their lyrics and asking them what they were talking about. And [Public Enemy] was like, “The *New York Times* never did that for us. The *Washington Post* never asked us what our lyrics actually meant or were referencing. They never really asked us to talk about what we were [trying to say]. Instead, they just threw this label on us and said, ‘Oh, they are incendiary.’ [In Europe] they actually asked us to talk about our lyrics at press conferences.” You know I am not glorifying Europe—I live there and Europe has tons of terrible aspects—but there is this kind of curiosity, this cultural curiosity that is healthy to me. And that is why thousands of artists every week are running from New York to Berlin to live, not just because the rents are cheap, but because they take culture seriously. They just do.

Later in the interview, Stew shared some of his memories and thoughts about Jimi Hendrix.

S: I remember when I was about thirty-two years old, the afternoon where I actually realized the totality of the fact that Hendrix was black. Of course I always knew he was a black man, but I walked into a friend’s house once and this live Hendrix bootleg was on and he was singing this blues tune and then playing. And it hit me in that moment. Wow, this was like 1967 or 1968, and this guy was looking the way he looked, singing the way he was singing, and playing the way he was.

And when I say “I realized he was black,” I realized his blackness in the context of the world. Not just America, but in the world. Like what he meant in that moment and the totality of it. And it stunned me, because for me he was just always Jimi Hendrix. He was just this guy that was always in my life. But when I realized racially, politically, sociologically, and psychologically what he meant, it was so powerful and it was kind of a madness. I thought, “My God, what must have been on that guy’s shoulders?” You know he had Black Panthers calling him this, he had *Rolling Stone* calling him an electric Uncle Tom. There were just all these people who were jealous and hating on him because the Brits had discovered him. It was overwhelming what he must have been going through. But again, I think that is how music operates. I don’t think we look at race. I really don’t think we do. I think we look at what is compelling to us, especially teenagers.



*Stew also discussed the reception of *Passing Strange* and its influence on black artists and audiences.*

AH: Can you talk a little bit about how you have been perceived, both by the black audience and the white audience?

S: With *Passing Strange* we did three runs. We did a run in Berkeley, we did a run in public theater in New York, and we did a run on Broadway. And after doing the play, there were a lot of black people out there who said, “Thank you. Thank you for making a play about this kid’s journey out of the incurious black middle class world and into the larger world. And thank you for showing what I actually lived.” I get e-mails every week. I get people coming up to me all the time saying, “This is our story that heretofore had never really been told.” ... There are black middle class artists out there who are struggling. They are not struggling against some kind of blanket of white racism, but they are struggling within their own community to be individuals.

AH: With *Passing Strange*, my guess would be that you are educating more listeners than musicians. Does this make sense?

S: Yes, I hope you are right. I would like to think that people will see this and say, “I did not know that kid existed. I did not know that there were black individuals who had these issues and had these kind of obsessions and were on this particular path of being an artist,” which is hard enough anyway in America, but definitely harder in a lot of ways if you are a black man trying to do it or a black woman trying to do it, most definitely. So yes, I hope we are educating non-musicians as well. It just so happens that the artists are the ones who are really cheering after this movie because they feel like finally, “Yeah, somebody is telling my story.”



In the 1970s and '80s, Willis performed as a lead singer and rhythm guitarist for Frank Zappa, recording records such as Joe's Garage, Tinsel Town Rebellion, and You Are What You Is. Willis also played the title character and narrator in Zappa's Thing-Fish. Today, Willis continues to perform with Zappa tribute bands around the world.

Andy Hollinden (AH): Was there a perception as you grew up and were doing your first gigs, that the rock 'n' roll music they had at the time was white music or black music? Was that even something people considered?

Ike Willis (IW): Well, no. I think that developed. I think that came along as rock 'n' roll became more popular and more lucrative, because when I was a kid rock 'n' roll was Chuck Berry and Buddy Holly at the same time, but mostly rock 'n' roll was Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Guitar Slim, and Ike Turner.

And then the Beatles came along and Elvis was there. That was kind of rock 'n' roll, but it was a different thing. Until the Beatles, remember, rock 'n' roll was making the transition from doo-wop where there weren't bands. There were four or five guys singing and performing, but they were basically what I guess today would be called "producer groups." Somebody else wrote the songs, like Carole King and Gerry Goffin or Leiber and Krebs. Those guys would write the songs and then the doo-wop groups would perform them.

With Chuck Berry and B.B. King, and then Albert King, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, and those guys, they were performing their stuff and the background guys were there but kind of not there. But when the Beatles came along, this was a band:

two guitars, bass, and drums, and they were performing their own music and they were playing their own instruments live. For me, this was it. This was the Godhead. This was phenomenal. That is what changed it for me. That is what changed it for everybody. Suddenly, everybody wanted to have a band, to actually physically play your own material.

And you are playing through amplifiers. It is like these big black boxes with speakers in them and you could actually play your own stuff. This, for me, was transformational. And so that is when rock 'n' roll became rock.

After discussing how he was considered an oddball within his own community, despite the heavy influence of black artists such as Muddy Waters and Chuck Berry on the Beatles, Willis moved on to challenge the American association of rock with white musicians in general.

AH: Can you speak a little bit about the changing perception of rock music in the black community and this perception of it being white music?

IW: Yes, I think that's kind of tragic. On the other hand, it's funny that you mention this, because in the black community I became even more of an oddball as the years went on. The fact of the images and the politics being perpetrated on television, radio, commercials and magazines is that rock 'n' roll is becoming more and more perceived in the black community as a white thing. We're talking about history being lost in the black community and awareness being lost that this is something that is a very big, big part of the black experience in America.

This starts with Mississippi Delta blues, actually. This starts with slavery, for God's sake. The two-four backbeat, the rhythmical underpinnings, if you will, of rock 'n' roll, this is very important. The chord structures, the call-response thing, the whole building blocks of rock 'n' roll, they started in the black community as part of the American black experience. And here I am trying to justify my existence in the black community when I would show up with my guitar and my amp and my band. People were going "Oh, that's white boy stuff." And it's like, "Wait a minute. No, no, you don't get it. Remember Chuck Berry, B.B. King, Little Richard? These are not white boys." And yes, that was pretty frustrating. To a certain extent it is still frustrating, because now with the advent of hip hop and rap and stuff like that, it's even worse. It is actually worse now because politics, business, and economics on both sides keep the chasm.

AH: My assumption is that this is an American phenomenon. Can you talk about other places in the world and how rock music is perceived in relation to race?

IW: Well, it is different in other parts of the world. In Europe, I don't have this problem. Actually, anywhere else in the world I don't have this problem. The thing is, whenever I play in Europe or Eastern Europe or the Middle East or South America, it's like everybody comes out. Music is music, rock 'n' roll is rock 'n' roll, and there's a huge appetite for it. The entire world wants as much of it as possible and it's a very American phenomenon. It has transformed cultures. It is part of why the Berlin Wall came down. It is very, very large in other parts of the world.

The Europeans, okay, they have been around a lot longer. They appreciate the music. As you know, I've been playing Frank Zappa's music for over thirty years now. I've run into people, for example, from Zappanale. These people have been running this festival for the last twenty years. These are the same people who when they were kids had to sneak around in candlelit basements and secretly listen to Frank Zappa's music, otherwise they were going to be thrown in jail because they were from East Germany—the Soviet Bloc. And Václav Havel was thrown in jail for listening to Frank Zappa's music. Now he's the president of Czechoslovakia. You could actually be put to death or in jail for listening to rock 'n' roll.

In other countries they appreciate the history more and appreciate the artists more for just who they are and the music. The Europeans love the music. They are into the music. They appreciate the history of it. They actually pay more attention to the history of the artists, where they came from, their performances, their compositions, everything. And it's like they don't see it. There are no black/white musicians there. No "This is a black rock 'n'

roll person," or "This is a white rock 'n' roll person." And there is no distinction made as far as I am concerned. I have been traveling back and forth and playing and performing in Europe and the rest of the world since I was twenty years old. For me, it was like a total breath of fresh air. For me it was amazing. It was a wonderful thing. I loved it.

Towards the end of the interview, Hollinden and Willis discussed the loss of the "roll" from rock music as white musicians began to dominate the industry.

AH: The history of rock 'n' roll is such that a guy like Alan Freed came out, [who was] a white DJ who wanted to play black music on radio stations so that white kids could hear it, but he called it rock 'n' roll as a bit of a disguise, a bit of a subterfuge. Would you say that "rock" is just taking it one step further to make it even more white? To just wash it more and get the blackness even further out?

IW: Yes, yes. I agree. Rock is becoming, to its detriment, more of a white thing without the acknowledgement of the black part of it. It is inconceivable to me that it should be that way. I don't like it. I don't think those conditions should exist in this day and age, especially since this is, at least from what they tell me, the twenty-first century. That shouldn't be the case, first of all, with music—period. But in the particular case with what is known as rock 'n' roll music, the end "roll" should not be taken and separated from the "rock" part, because they are equally as important. They are equally as viable and also they are equally as necessary to the survival and the evolution of this music.

AH: That is what we are after, my man. You talk about the rock separating the rock from the roll. I think when people talk about the rock they will say, "Man that rocks," or "This thing rocks." How many people know what that means? In your own terms, what is the "roll"?

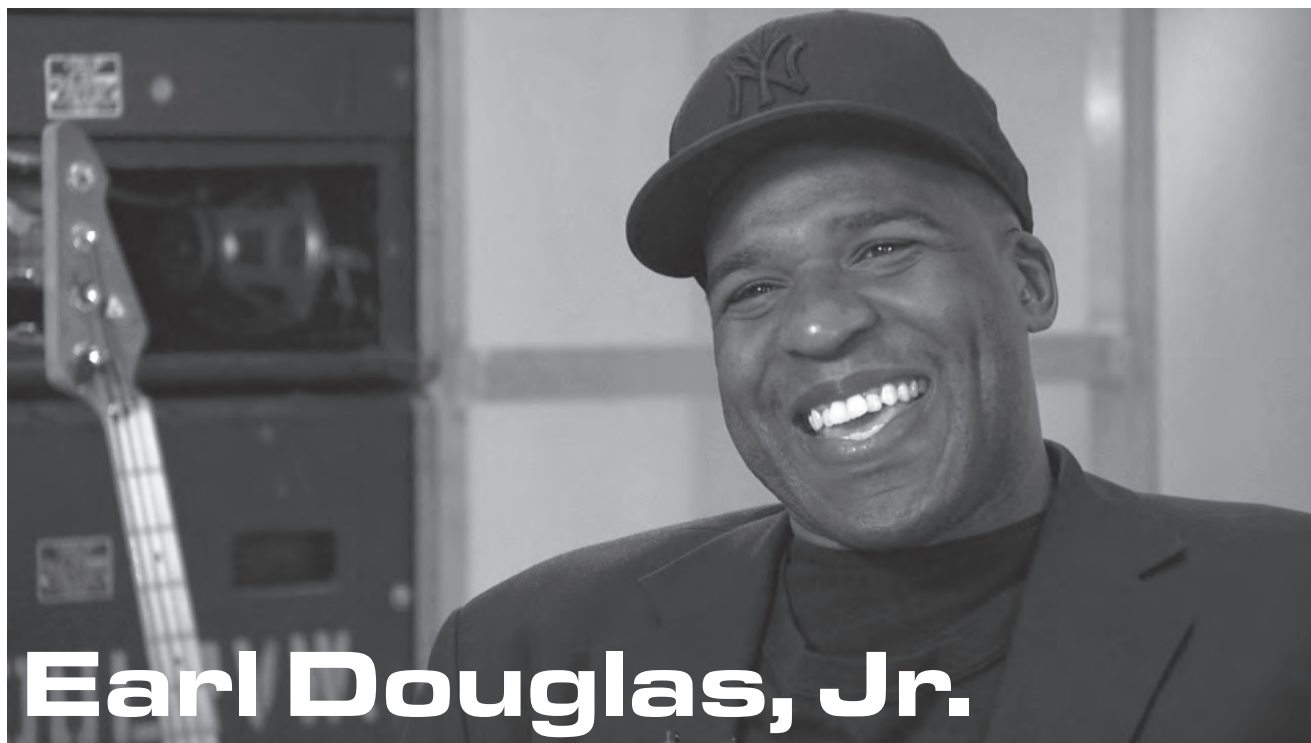
IW: The roll is the visceral rhythmical aspect of it. Okay, there is that aggressive part, but there's also the fun, bouncy, rhythmical, soulful part. The roll part puts edges on those corners. You see what I am saying? It softens the blow a bit to make it more enjoyable and fun. The roll part is the fun aspect of it. That is why there should always be rock 'n' roll, because without the roll part how can you rock?

AH: It leads to headbanging.

IW: That just evolves into headbanging, mindless headbanging and moshing and throwing things.

AH: Fist pumping.

IW: And fist pumping and stuff like that. Who can tell?



Earl Douglas, Jr.

Earl Douglas, Jr. is currently Executive Director of the Black Rock Coalition (BRC) and has played an integral role in the organization since 1988. Furthermore, he has served as one of its most active historians and photographers. In conjunction with the BRC's 25th Anniversary, Douglas recently published Black Rock, Volume 1 (Square 2010), which contains over 100-pages of full-color photos documenting the role of black performers in rock music.

Reebee Garofalo (RG): Why is it that this term “black rock” needs a coalition?

Earl Douglas, Jr. (ED): It was really more of a rallying point for everyone because there were so many artists that felt alone. When I was just getting around and starting in the Coalition, it was like there was Jon Butcher, Joan Armatrading—just a handful of guys, but they felt like they were scattered and out in the wilderness a little bit and we just thought, “Why not have a rallying point for everyone?” For me, during the first couple years those meetings were basically griping sessions. It was a place to vent. It was like, “Why can’t I get booked? How can I get into a better position to have a deal?” It was really more like, “Let’s have a unified front where we can present shows together. As opposed to being on a scattered bill with a bunch of other bands of different genres, why don’t we just form our own genre and present it as a package?” So that is one of the reasons why the Coalition was really necessary.

It was also kind of a reclamation, where we saw [rock] almost as a birthright. Rock ’n’ roll had black roots. It

had roots in the blues. The early pioneers were Chuck Berry and Little Richard and Fats Domino, so we felt like, “Why not just reclaim it?” It was almost a political statement unto itself. “We’re a black rock band. We play rock music.” At the time, that was a very bold thing, even though back in ’85, ’86, the biggest names in entertainment were all basically black. You had Eddie Murphy in the movies. You had Lionel Richie and Whitney Houston in pop. You had Prince, who was basically doing rock ’n’ roll. No one was really coming out and saying, “Why don’t we put him in the same pantheon as Bruce Springsteen?” but [Prince] was a rock star. His live presentation was as much of a rock show as that of anybody else at the time.

RG: To what extent do you think your political statement was effective? How successful were you in saying rock had black roots?

ED: To me, Living Colour was like my Jackie Robinson. I was seventeen, about to turn eighteen, when *Vivid* came out. Suddenly it was like, “Hey, this is possible. This is very doable.” And pretty much every wave of black artists now either openly acknowledges or owes a debt to them, because they really kicked down that door and they sold records on top of it. *Vivid* sold two million copies. They had a hit single and it was just through sheer perseverance. People forget *Vivid* came out in March or April of ’88, and “Cult of Personality” came out at the end of the year. So it was six months of just relentless touring, opening for the Godfathers, anybody and anyone, and then [they opened for the Stones] and it just really took off. So I think it just gave

“I think if you’re a band, the avenues to get your music out are so much better now. You don’t need a record label to really distribute your record. You just need a modem and a dream.”

a lot of hope to people. It just gave them a forum to be very open about being a black rock band or being a black rock musician.

RG: What was the work you were doing at this time that made the BRC seem like an effective organization for you?

ED: Initially I was just a supporter. We used to have our meetings up at Frank Silvera’s. It was like this famous theater workshop. He had an open space and we would meet there like once a month on a Saturday. I’ll never forget my first meeting that I went to, taking the A-Train up to Harlem for the first time and I got out and suddenly guys were trying to sell me stuff. I walked down the street and Al Sharpton was leading a protest in front of the Korean deli and I walk into this room of guys who thought like me, and talked like me, and had the same musical mindset as me. It was very unifying. And I kept attending and just listened. Again, a lot of the meetings were more freewheeling. They were just addressing concerns—the music industry, things that were happening in the industry. Things like what was happening in radio, favorite records we were listening to, etc.

And then we would always have a meeting after the meeting. We’d go downstairs and basically no one left. We would stand on 125th Street and everything carried over from the meeting. Then everyone would talk about whatever shows were happening that night, so it became this unifying thing. We would all travel in packs because we would go to dinner, and one guy would have a set at 8:00, another guy would have a set at 9:30, another guy would have a set at 10:30. And everyone ended up at CB’s at the end of the night, because it always ran late, and someone was always playing there.

Later in the interview, Douglas discussed his role in the BRC as the Director of Public Concerns and the record industry’s reception of rock by black artists.

RG: You went from being the volunteer handing out leaflets after the meetings to becoming the Executive Director of the organization. At what point did you become Executive Director and how did you end up in that position?

ED: It was a gradual process. I went to all the meetings and then within a year after I joined the organization, I got into radio. I started as an intern at WNEW, which was a legendary rock station, so I was kind of



Participants, including Jared Nickerson, from “Rap Meets Rock” performance hosted at the 1992 New Music Seminar.

in the belly of this very big beast and saw the business in a different way. I was bringing that all back to what was going on within the BRC. I was like, “Hey, this is what’s going on,” and I was learning the dynamics of how you got on the radio, learning the dynamics of what got on the radio, and why it got on the radio, and what the business was promoting and what it wasn’t promoting.

I was just bringing this all back to the organization and initially I was the Director of Public Concerns, which was basically the political arm of the organization.... [One concern BRC members had was that] certain records that should fall under the “black rock” umbrella were getting thrown into the R&B section.... So it was things like “How do we address [this with] the record companies?” And I was like, “Hey, why don’t you put something on it that says file it in the rock section?” Later they would slap on “File under ‘rock.’” Pretty simple.

RG: What response did you get from the record companies when you were trying to get black rockers under rock instead of R&B?

ED: They were initially kind of taken aback. In New York there was this big conference called the New Music Seminar... I’ll never forget. It was either a marketing panel or an A&R panel and Jared Nickerson, who I think was Director of Public Concerns at the time, he was one of the BRC execs and he stood up and he asked this very beautifully framed question. He said, “In the ’60s when the Beatles broke, you guys went after anything with a British name and signed it. In the ’70s when punk broke, anything with a safety pin and an attitude got signed. In the ’80s...” at the time I think it was Tex-

Mex, Stevie Ray Vaughn, The Fabulous Thunderbirds, you know that whole sound. He goes, “Um, Living Colour sold two million records without any help from you guys. What’s the deal?” And you could hear a pin drop in the room. Everyone was kind of taken aback.

RG: What was the answer to that?

ED: It was a total tap dance. The irony was the major labels at the time still stayed away from it. The indies jumped all over it. There were some great labels that really supported it: Enemy Records out of Long Island City, Gramavision, to a degree Ryko Discs who ended up joining the Coalition’s first compilation record, *The History of Our Future*. But then we found out we had our next hurdle to climb, which was the “Highlander theory,” as Darrell McNeil, our Director of Operations called it, which is “There can be only one.” So if Living Colour ascended, no one else was getting it. There was no real big second wave. When Living Colour was on hiatus, Lenny Kravitz took that mantle, but there was no Lenny Kravitz and Living Colour. They never happened at the same time.... Now it’s great, because you’ve got Gnarl Barkley, and you’ve got TV on the Radio, and you’ve got Santigold, and Rain Machine, and you still have Living Colour, who just made this incredible record. There are all these great records now that are all out at the same time.

After discussing the early role of the music industry in controlling the distribution of artists, Douglas discussed the role of the Internet and prominent concert venues in connecting performers with potential audiences.

RG: To what extent are you making use of the Internet and to what extent do you see that as a solution to the historical difficulties you’ve had with existing labels and the way they’re configured?

ED: It is a lot easier.... Suddenly instead of printing 300 flyers and running around, you post it on your website, you post it on Facebook, you post it on Twitter, you post it anywhere—MySpace. We can do a compilation record now and not even press it. We can just do it virally. We can do a digital release where, with the click of a button, you download the entire record. You can put samples on your MySpace page. I think if you’re a band, the avenues to get your music out are so much better now. You don’t need a record label to really distribute your record. You just need a modem and a dream.

RG: To what extent has this become, or do you think it

will become, a viable alternative for black rockers who might not be able to get a fair shake at a record label?

ED: At the end, it comes down to the song. It used to be, “Who is the band?” You’d look at the band and immediately, whether you wanted to or not, you’d have these preconceived notions about what it should sound like. For example, when Living Colour was trying to sell copies of *Vivid*, there was a slight effort not to show their publicity photos. I remember “Middle Man” changed my life... I knew people that were close to the band, who were saying, “Look at the video again, and watch it really carefully.” There was a very discerned effort not to show the band, because [the producers] were trying to sell the song.

When you click on a MySpace page, the first thing that comes on is a song. If the song is good and you want to go see [the band] play, everything else is almost irrelevant. Whether you are dark-skinned, light-skinned, tall, short, husky, thin, whatever, the initial thing is, “Wow, I like the song.”

RG: Given the situation now, what are the main challenges facing the BRC?

ED: For me, just from an organizational standpoint, trying to marshal all the forces together. The black rock scene—whatever the scene is—it’s still not really centralized yet. You’ve got us, you’ve got Afro-punk, you’ve got URB Alt, you’ve got ghetto metal. You have all of these organizations, but it’s not really centered yet. We still haven’t had like the big rock tour. We haven’t had the black version of Lollapalooza where you get a three- or four- or five-band package together and have them zigzag across the stage. That hasn’t really happened yet.

RG: Is that going to happen and are you guys going to do it?

ED: I cannot confirm or deny the existence of that. It’s still difficult to sell the BRC to promoters and organizers. The BRC has made amazing strides in the New York scene, where we’re getting a look from Lincoln Center Out of Doors and Central Park SummerStage. We’re part of the conversation now, whereas before it was, “What exactly is it?” We’re getting the black rock brand strengthened to where BRC equals “good show.” Hey, it doesn’t matter who’s on the bill. We know it’s a good show. That is one of the challenges. It is coming around very slowly but it’s happening.



Guitarist-songwriter-vocalist Tamar-kali entered the New York rock scene around 1993 while performing with the band Funkface. Shortly thereafter, she became the front woman for Song of Seven, another New York-based rock band. Tamar-kali's strength as a woman in a male-dominated genre eventually led to creative conflict and compelled her toward her own expression as a songwriter and vocalist, which developed into her current eclectic musical style.

In addition to leading her diverse ensembles, 5ive Piece and the Psycho Chamber Ensemble string sextet, Tamar-kali heads her own production company, Flaming Yoni Productions, and has worked with other artists in hip hop and rock such as OutKast and Fishbone.

Reebee Garofalo (RG): So you were in Funkface and then Song of Seven. How do you describe the sound and what was your role in shaping it?

Tamar-kali (TK): Basically, I did one year at a private university and could not afford to continue. But while I was there, I met this brother that was really into Fishbone, which I could tell from orientation day. I felt like he was doing his best Angelo Moore impression, so I approached him eventually. There was this big standoff for a while, and then eventually I was just like, "What's your deal?" because we knew what was up, so we got to know each other. And then when I came home, we started going to shows together. He was in a band and he was introducing

me to his friends, and just hanging out in the scene. At one point the singer that they were working with, Israel, ended up playing with Bad Brains at a time when H.R. wasn't anymore, so they needed a new singer. And I was like, "Oh! I want to audition." And basically they brushed me off because they weren't trying to audition a girl.

So that happened. I was hanging around the scene. I would jump up on people's stages, just in that really community punk rock way. And then different bands on the scene were like, "Why don't you come and jam with us?" And I ended up playing with Funkface, just doing a little featured vocalist thing. They were like a funk hardcore band, kind of along the lines of Red Hot Chili Peppers, with a really soulful vocal and more aggression. They were into that point in Funkadelic's history where "Alice in My Fantasies" really spoke to them. So their music was kind of like that, but then it had infusions of a little bit of ska and some of Bad Brains' reggae hardcore.

A lot of stuff like that was going on in the scene with mixing genres, but [Funkface] had a really big following, and I just started singing with them as a featured vocalist. And then after a while, I kind of moved on from there and Song of Seven was ready to jam with me. So that was a cool experience. We considered it post-hardcore at that time. But I definitely felt the burden of being a woman in this band. Not from every



member, but we were having conflicts based on my lyrics. And as a front person, the rule for me always was, “I get to say what I want to say, especially if we’re sharing.” If you’re doing the riffs and I’m bringing the melody and lyrics, that’s it. If you think it’s wack, that’s one thing, but I got to a point where they were trying to censor me and it caused a serious schism in the band and we eventually broke up.

Later in the interview, Tamar-kali described the formation of the Psycho Chamber Ensemble, an all-female, six-piece string ensemble that performs arrangements of hardcore songs first performed by 5ive Piece as well as Tamar-kali’s original compositions. As one of the featured interviewees in James Spooner’s Afro-punk, she also provided commentary on the origins of the title and the use of subgenre labels within the punk scene.

TK: I decided I wanted to deconstruct the songs I was doing in the 5ive Piece and have them be all strings—no percussion, just strings. And I thought that was really hardcore, just to take some three-chord, hard, aggressive songs and arrange them for strings. And so I did that and then I decided I wanted to have just female instrumentalists, so I did that as well. And basically it branched out from deconstructing other pieces to me composing specifically for the project. And that’s how it became its own project, because at first it was almost like an installation. It was almost like me doing a commentary on my art, and then it became its own project. And then from there, I wanted to be able to fuse the strings and not have it so naked. But I started writing for piano too, so I wanted to bring that together. I have a project called Pseudoacoustic, and it’s just different formats for me to express my composition.

RG: What led you to envision the chamber ensemble as all-female?

TK: At that time, I fell upon these other amazing women and we started doing shows together. And I gave us

the name of “Sister Girls” because we had been talking about Riot Girls in terms of identity, culture, and color. One of the women in the collective played violin. The first time I saw her, she just really blew my mind. She made me so emotional in a different way, in a way that strings do as opposed to just hardcore aggressive music, and I thought it was so awesome. I think that’s what really inspired me, is meeting her. She was in the first incarnation. Her name is Simmie. Seeing her in rock clubs just playing her electric violin, which is what she used, just reawakened that love for me. And I think it was probably in dedication—my love for my sister—that I just decided to do all females.

RG: You’re one of the featured artists in the film *Afro-Punk*. For you, what’s the “Afro” in *Afro-Punk*?

TK: My friend Honey Child introduced me to James Spooner one summer. She was like, “I know this guy. He’s doing a film about black kids in the hardcore and punk scene and he wants to do some interviews.” I was like, “All right, okay.” And at that time it was just called *Rock ’n’ Roll Nigger*. But as it was becoming a piece of some note and [Spooner] was starting to work with other people, it was clear that he needed another title that would allow him to receive all of the attention he should, as opposed to it being specifically because of the title. That title was going to cut off a whole audience. So he made the decision at that time to call it *Afro-Punk: The Rock ’n’ Roll Nigger Experience*. And that was the inception. So regarding “Afro-punk,” the term had been used throughout the years before the film. I used to call myself “bush punk.” You just come up with these words, these word plays, to try to identify yourself. But, as it concerns the film, it’s a title—a creative way to kind of hint at what’s going on in the film.

RG: Is it simply a hook or are you trying to capture something of the African American experience within punk?

TK: I guess the issue with labels, even though “punk” is a label itself, is that the whole conversation just gets messy. So, I think “Afro-punk” is giving you a hint as to what the topic is concerning the film. And obviously the film is a race piece. It’s about the subculture within subcultures and how somehow in America, African Americans always end up being the subculture within anything that they participate in that is not so-called traditionally or typically black. So even within this subculture, which isn’t supposed to be about the mainstream, you find yourself isolated yet again if you choose to recognize your blackness.

Garofalo and Tamar-kali closed the interview by discussing her acceptance by black audiences and her self-perceptions about her role as an educator.

RG: Did you find acceptance in the broader African American community?

TK: Absolutely not. Ever since I was young, I was constantly told that I behaved “white,” and I know that’s a recurring theme in the film. And I guess that’s what we’re reclaiming. We’re reclaiming the right to be who we are. It’s so deep, though, because it is specifically the lack of information out there about the roots of rock ’n’ roll that creates this stigma in the black community. So it is related directly, definitely, because people don’t see it as black. You could say “Bo Diddley,” “Chuck Berry,” but [those names] might mean nothing to them. So it does relate directly to that lack of historical information and reference.

And then too, it relates to deep-seated trauma, psychological trauma, in our community about branching out, because for many generations that could get you killed. And we have this fear in ourselves that’s been passed down from mother to children to keep your children safe. You couldn’t branch out. When you think about Emmett Till, all of these situations, and people don’t realize that it correlates, but it’s a deep part of our psyche as a community, and that’s part of it.

And then there’s the whole class thing. When I wanted to rip my jeans, my mother looked at me like, “Are you crazy? You want to rip your jeans? I’m working, I’m killing myself to get you through school, to put clothes on your back, and you want to destroy the clothes I’m buying for you?” So that’s the whole classic economics part, but there are just all of these variables that make it a very odd choice. And even though the generations before us were fighting for our right to be free, they have very clear-cut ideas of what that freedom should look like. So I think that’s the schism in the community in terms of how people reacted to me.

I do have to say that some of it did play into the homophobic and misogynist tendencies in the community as well. A lot of times people have assumed I’m queer because I’m punk rock, because they didn’t have a reference to punk rock. And it’s like, “Okay, I don’t know what you are, so if I don’t know what you are, you must be gay.” That’s a thread. And then there were just times where, because of my choices to have a shaved head and to wear combat boots, I was met with a lot of antagonism from men. They felt like I was rejecting them and that I was a lesbian separatist. I used to have this pin that said “Black Feminism Lives.” So it just can be very incendiary, just making the choice to be your own person. Not just as a black person, but to be your own person as a black woman, because somehow that is you rejecting the black man. So there are so many angles.

RG: How do you deal with a situation where you run into people misperceiving who you are or you run into people’s historical ignorance coloring the way they see what you’re doing?

TK: I didn’t want to embrace the role of teacher straight on, because somehow it spelled “mammy” to me. You’ve either got that or the noble savage, [who is] like this benevolent, very spiritual creature. Your people are downtrodden, but you’re such a diamond in the rough. I don’t want to be that. I just want to be a person. And that’s the insidious way that racism is a poison, because people think that they’re imbuing all of these special talents and gifts on you and you should love that. It’s like, “Why can’t you just see me as another equal? I either have to be something you fear or something you’re aspiring to be. Why can’t I just be your fellow human being?” That’s that little weird niche where people kind of miss the point, where they’re like, “I’m not racist. I think you’re a goddess.” I’m like, “No, that’s how you’re expressing your racism at this moment, by objectifying me.” So I made the decision that I don’t want to be this mammy figure, this mother figure, that’s admonishing you. I don’t want that.... And it can go both ways. Sometimes people will never speak to me again, they will not patronize me again, or they’ll be like, “Thank you for that. I didn’t know that.”... I’m just keeping it real at a level that I can respect myself, and I don’t feel like I’m being abusive, and I don’t feel like I’m coddling another adult who just needs to be informed.

RG: So you don’t want to take on that role of an educator as a whole, but do you bring some of that educational function into your music? Do you discharge it in that way?

TK: I think people respond more to my voice and to the music and aren’t always clear on the lyrics, to be honest. People who are familiar with the lyrics have expressed appreciation, but I think somehow I’m getting to them sonically even when they don’t know the lyrics. I know people who have seen a show maybe one time and they thank me for the experience, and I’m not always clear on what it was, because I don’t think they got all of the lyrics.

RG: Is there something in the quality of your voice that maybe communicates something you want to get across to people?

TK: I’ve been told so. I just try to keep it pure. I try not to think. That’s one thing. I try not to think too much. And with writing, it’s really inspiration-based and feeling-based.

— Transcripts edited by Ronda L. Sewald

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