

# What Effect Did the American Civil Rights Movement Have on the Music Industry?

How Did the Music Affect the Civil Rights Movement?



# Aims

- To show how changes in society forced structural changes within the music industry.
- To explore some of the artists and record companies involved in this period of dramatic change.
- To examine some of the politically motivated music of the era by looking at musical and lyrical changes.
- To explore genres of black music that reacted to the changing political climate and to explore genres that were born out of these changes.
- To draw some conclusions about popular music and the industry itself reacting to sociological change and if popular music can influence political change.

# Background to American Music Markets in the Early 1950s

At the start of the 1950s there were TWO distinct markets...

- **A mainstream pop market-**

Aimed at a predominately white audience with music played by predominately white artists/ musicians



- **A much smaller blues/ R&B market-**

Aimed at a minority black audience living in the south where blues, gospel and R&B originated, played by mostly black musicians. Record companies catering for these black audiences were usually localised independents

# First Crossovers Between Markets



- In July 1954 'Sh – boom' by The Chords crossed over from the R&B market into the mainstream pop market. Although it wasn't the first black record to do this it opened the floodgates for R&B songs and groups to crossover to the far more lucrative pop market.
- Before this R&B was exclusive to a black audience, mostly played by black musicians.
- By the end of 1954 income from R&B tours and record sales equalled a \$25 million branch of the industry.
- R&B had a significant influence on the development of rock & roll which was an integrated form of music with; black & white groups and a black & white audience.

# Example of Reverse Crossover - Elvis



- Just as significant as early black R&B crossovers was the acceptance of white artists/ groups performing in styles derived from R&B.
- Reverse crossovers began with white rock & rollers. In April 1956 billboard reported the unusual success of Carl Perkins's 'Blue Suede Shoes' and Elvis's 'Heartbreak Hotel' with black audiences.
- Before the end of the black R&B chart in November 1963 Presley had 24 R&B hits, including 4 number ones.
- The success of early white rockers prompted some resentment from black artists who saw them as muscling in on their R&B market.
- However, many black artists recognised the importance of Elvis and other white artists in making the transition possible.
- When asked about this issue Little Richard replied 'Thank God for Elvis Presley'.

# Integration of Markets...

## and the Importance of Rock & Roll in This Process

- By the end of 1955 rock & roll had emerged as a distinct musical style with an ever increasing number of young white fans. Young whites had previously began listening to R&B but rock & roll had a much more dramatic effect on merging black and white markets.
- The popularity of black music with young white audiences helped erode traditional segregation of American popular culture.
- This process helped ease some of the tension between blacks & whites and gave a voice to the civil rights movement capable of reaching into white suburbia.
- A black journalist recognised the importance of rock & roll for integration when he wrote : "Rock & roll, then, is a combination of gospel songs, blues, the 'oo bop shee bam' of bebop, the sentimentality of the love ballad , the folksy material of the hillbilly or western type song and things based on popular experiences. Rock & roll today has no color line in listening appreciation or in it's development".

# The Rise of the Independents

- In late 1956 billboard reported that 25 of the 125 pop chart entries during the first 50 weeks of that year were from black R&B/ rock & roll records. Many others were either white cover versions of black records or white bands performing in styles obviously derived from black music.
- In 1957 the INDEPENDENT RECORD COMPANIES responsible for recording much of this material accounted for an amazing 76% of the years hit singles.
- In 1958 more than 90 % of the 155 record appearing in the R&B chart crossed over into the pop charts.
- The MAJORS were threatened for the first time by;
  1. The rise of the independents and.
  2. The unprecedented popularity of black and black derived styles with young white audiences.

Quote: "At no other point in the two hundred year history of popular song in America had there been such a drastic and dramatic change in such a small period of time" Charles Hamm.

# Rise of the Independents Continued...

The POWERFUL ALLIANCE of...

Tin Pan Alley music publishing houses

A white downward-pointing arrow with a black outline, indicating a flow from the Tin Pan Alley music publishing houses to the Professional Songwriters.

Professional Songwriters

A white downward-pointing arrow with a black outline, indicating a flow from the Professional Songwriters to the Network Radio.

Network Radio

A white downward-pointing arrow with a black outline, indicating a flow from the Network Radio to the Major Recording Labels.

Major Recording Labels

# Majors Threatened By a New Breed Of...

Song Publishers



Black Orientated Radio Stations



Distributors



AND

Independent Record Labels

# Example Of Black Label - Motown



- Of all the new labels to emerge in the black pop era none would pursue the **integrated market** with more energy, skill and success than Berry Gordy's Detroit based Motown.
- Gordy intended the label to become 'the sound of young America' and not just a young black America.
- Nothing symbolised the optimism, sense of expanding possibilities and intergrationalist agenda of the period than Gordy's belief the feat was possible.



# Background to Gordy & Motown

- Using family money Gordy formed his first label Tamala in January 1959.
- Moved on to form Motown Record Corp and later formed sub companies within the Motown corporation, these were;
  - Hitsville USA.
  - Berry Gordy Jr Enterprises.
  - A publishing firm called Jobete Music and...
  - A management agency called International Talent Management Inc (ITMI).
- Gordy eventually supplemented Tamala with a host of subsidiary labels:
  - Motown itself.
  - Miracle (renamed Gordy in 1962).
  - VIP and...
  - A gospel experiment named Divinity.
- He did this to protect against the possible failure of individual Labels.

# International Talent Management Inc. (ITMI).

- ITMI managed ALL Midtown's creative personnel and acts.
- ITMI took a cut of all creative personnel's salaries whether they had been productive/ successful that week or not.
- It also gave young black hopefuls notoriously mean contracts which were very restrictive and meant Gordy had almost total control over the image, material and career of his roster of young black talent.
- This is an example of Gordy's shrewd business practices which helped him be so successful. In this respect Motown was no different to the established majors of the time.
- Question – Did Gordy exploit his staff and acts and exploit the social tension of the period? Did he care about the civil rights movement or was he solely concerned with making money?

# Breaking The Chains Of Motown – Stevie Wonder

- At the age of 21 in 1971 Wonder negotiated an unparalleled deal with Gordy. It allowed him to set up TAUJARUS PRODUCTIONS, which leased product to Motown for release, Sam Cooke had previously used this method with his Tracy company leasing product to RCA. Wonder also gained higher royalties than his peers and claimed his share of the publishing rights to his songs.



- With his new found artistic freedom and control Wonder explored his increasing political and social concerns in six albums released in the early to mid 70's, these were: Where I'm coming from, Music of my mind, Talking Book, Innervisions, Fulfillingness First Finale and the 1976 double album and EP Songs in the Key of Life. This album topped the album charts for 14 weeks!

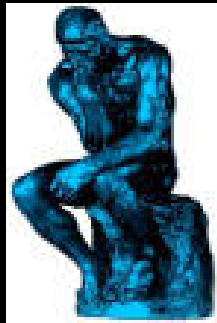
# Musical Example – ‘Living For The City’ – Stevie Wonder, Innervisions 1973

**“We as a people are not interested in ‘baby, baby’ songs anymore”. Stevie Wonder**



- The song tells the story of a poor Mississippian black man who flees the South where he has no chance of finding work, “To find a job is like a haystack needle, cause where he lives they don’t use colored people”.
- The man goes to New York hoping for a better chance in life, but when he arrives he unwittingly becomes involved in drug running by another “bother”, who sets him up. This occurs in a dramatisation in a self contained section in the middle of the song. Wonder highlights police brutality through his character’s experience, “get in the cell nigger!”. Wonder is also trying to show the ruthless and dog eat dog nature of the black inner city streets of the period which was created by poverty and racism. This is a brilliant use of story telling by Wonder which is both atmospheric and thought provoking.

# Conclusions



- The unparalleled popularity of black music spawned a new breed of black owned record companies and sister companies which forced Major record companies to take notice of a rapidly expanding new market. This was the first significant competition to the established Major's dominance.
- Because music from black origin broke into main stream American culture it gave a voice to the civil rights movement capable of reaching into middle America. This was a powerful messenger whether the listener realised it or not.
- New genre's of music were created because of black artists reacting to the civil rights movement. Rock & roll was the most significant in easing social tension as it was an integrated style of music that helped people from different ethnic backgrounds relate to each other.

# Questions?

