

“Melanin in the Music”: Black Music History in Sound and Image

Charles D. Carson

“If you find yourself written out of history,
you can feel free to write yourself back in...”
—George Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself*

In *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, George Lewis undertakes the arduous task of “writing back in” to history a story that had, for the most part, been excluded. The resulting narrative casts new light on heretofore marginalized modes of African–American creativity, altering our conception of not only the jazz canon, but the entirety of (at least) the American musical tradition. In doing so, Lewis forces us to ask one of the most difficult questions: *What else have we missed?*

More than that, however, Lewis’s project reveals an unwavering faith in the ability of music, art, literature, and dance to actively engage—and affect—ideas about community, identity, and history (xxxii). The AACM used the arts as a means of enacting change, and Lewis’s account demonstrates the potential—if not the efficacy—of such work. The arts and the artists who create them form part of a conversation amongst all Americans, one in which negotiations about who we were, are, and hope to be take place. With respect to African–American expressive practices, these conversations seem especially important, influenced as they are by discontinuities in historical narratives, legacies of oppression, and the increasing cooptation of Black cultural practices. While Lewis’s work is motivated by a need to question, and eventually revise, accepted narratives within the jazz tradition, such moves have become increasingly common among a variety of genres of Black music in recent years. In jazz, soul/r&b, rock, pop, and hip–hop, contemporary musicians are attempting to draw attention to the systematic cooptation of Black music by both the music industry and popular culture at large. ...

Take as a case in point Mos Def, a rapper who initially gained attention as one half of the underground hip–hop duo Black Star. While modest critical reception and the Gold record status of his 1999 solo debut, *Black on Both Sides* (Rawkus Records), did not make Mos Def a household name, it did provide evidence that the public was amenable to his thoughtful Black nationalist–inspired philosophies and laid–back style of flow (Posten 1999). Among the album’s high points is the track, “Rock n Roll,” which—while predating Lewis’ work by a decade—draws from the same critical and historiographic traditions. This song highlights what some might call inac-

curacies in the historical record by reasserting the role of Black musicians in the development of popular music. Mos Def seeks to set the record straight about popular music history, and offers into evidence a number of Black artists he feels have been overlooked in favor of their lighter counterparts (Table 1). Many of the artists Mos Def singles out as those who “ain’t got no soul” belong to the pop pantheon, including The Rolling Stones and Elvis Presley. (Curiously, smooth jazz saxophonist Kenny G is also included in this category, likely as a foil to John Coltrane.) Moreover, the not un-ironic insistence that the Black musicians listed under “is rock ‘n roll” are, in fact, rock n roll musicians sits in sharp contrast to the wide range of musical styles and genres that they represent: from jazz, to soul and R&B, to rock n roll itself. Mos Def’s performance highlights not only the fact that the contributions and legacies of these (Black) musicians have been largely ignored (or at the very least, coopted), but also how the influences of their associated genres have been overlooked. The implication is that this “whitewashing” has facilitated the arrogation of Black musical genres. Mos Def’s track is overtly concerned with this process, and issues a call for the reclamation of Black music.

“Rock n Roll” further complicates the relationship between these genres by foregrounding a sample from Mobb Deep’s 1999 track “Allustrious,” in which rapper Prodigy refers to hip-hop as “heavy metal for the Black people” (*Murda Musik*). This statement has a dual meaning. By drawing together hip-hop and heavy metal in the same breath, the sample underscores the shared socio-political functions (such as giving voice to a dispossessed group) of these seemingly disparate musics. At the same time however, this statement can be read as a call to arms: a sonic reclamation of a coopted genre. In this case, Prodigy and Mos Def (by proxy) seem to be calling for a re-appropriation of a musical lineage that often goes unremarked upon within the music industry, one that includes not only rock n roll, but even related genres like heavy metal. Mos Def appears to confirm this reading when, towards the end of the track, the style shifts from hip-hop to what can perhaps best be described as speed metal. Speed metal (or perhaps thrash metal), as a sub-genre of rock n roll, is most often associated with white youth culture, and its use here represents what I believe to be a conscious effort on Mos Def’s part to draw attention to the processes of appropriation, and—in effect—to take back the music (Walser 1993, Mahon 2004, Pillsbury 2006).

Such acts of reclamation form the core discussion of this paper. The impetus behind this project concerns the ways in which important voices in Black music history (and in this article, the United States specifically) have been ignored, overlooked, written out, or silenced in favor of what seem to be more or less widely accepted teleological narratives. Perhaps

just as problematic, however, is that when Black artists and their works are discussed, they often serve merely as romanticized reminders of the past—as *nostalgia*. In the following discussion, I would like to explore these ideas with respect to the relationship between African–American music and visual art. I will examine some ways in which contemporary artists and musicians use Black music—as an index for Black culture as a whole—to reclaim African–American history and memory. Rather than focusing on loss, these artists celebrate the continued immediacy of the works they reference (and the past they represent) as a means of sidestepping the impotence of nostalgia.

My reading of nostalgia is heavily influenced by film theorist Paul Grainge, who defines it as “a socio–cultural response to forms of discontinuity, claiming a vision of stability and authenticity in some conceptual ‘golden age’” (2002; 21). Moreover, Grainge sees—among other things—the commodification of memory as a primary motivation for the “culture of nostalgia” that developed around the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. The feelings of distance and loss, part and parcel of contemporary theories of nostalgia, are omnipresent in discourses surrounding popular music: reunion tours, compilations albums, or common tropes like “oldies,” “classic,” or “retro.” For recent examples in Black popular music, one only has to look as far as The Black Eyed Peas’ “They Don’t Want Music” (*Monkey Business*, 2005) or—more prominently—the title track from Prince’s 2004 double–Platinum and double–Grammy–winning album, *Musicology*.¹ Both tracks invoke the past merely to lament how far current popular music has fallen. In glorifying the past as *lost*, such works promote seemingly unproblematic historical narratives, ones in which processes of appropriation are either ignored altogether, or helplessly shrugged off as a matter of fact.

Nostalgia can be very powerful from an emotional perspective—as a means of maintaining connections to an often meaningful past—but its weakness lies in its unquestioning romanticizing of that past. By continually looking backward, we forget to act *now*. Instead of building upon that past, we fetishize it. Scholars and artists like Lewis and Mos Def seem to offer an alternative. Like the best historians, they posit readings of the present that integrate *re*–readings of the past, and in doing so, expose both the discourses that inform the contemporary Black experience, and the often hidden power structures that sustain those discourses.

Let me be clear: this approach is not new. Lewis and Mos Def are certainly not the originators of this form of critique, but perhaps only among its most recent (and gifted) practitioners. It can be argued that such a relationship to the past is a constituent part of the African–American experience, with roots that can be traced back to the West African concept of *sankofa*—or,

“return and reclaim” (Mbiti 1991). As a literary tradition, it extends at least as far back as Gil Scott Heron, Amiri Baraka, or Langston Hughes. These writers resonate with the current discussion in that they worked, in various ways, to place music in a central position with respect to the formation and articulation of African–American identity. However, such critiques seem to have taken on greater urgency since the mid–twentieth century as the increased commodification of African–American cultural practices—music chief among them—continues to contribute to the speed of both their dissemination and appropriation (Lott 1993, Phinney 2005). In turn, the pace at which Black musical practices are being unquestionably absorbed into the pop music repertoire threatens to weaken the recognition of the cultural ties between these expressive practices and the African–American community and its culture, which might be interpreted as a continuing act of oppression. No doubt for this reason we have seen a significant growth in the number, determination, and creativity of such critiques in a variety of modes of African–American cultural expression recently, and it is this thread I would like to take up in the remainder of this article.

In his recent work, *Cultural Codes* (2010), William Banfield takes such questions as a starting point for an exploration of African–American modes of expression. Banfield articulates what he sees as a central concern among many members of the African–American arts community; namely, the growing disconnect between African–American cultural products and culture from which they are derived. As an African–American composer, performer, and educator, Banfield’s discussion takes on a tone of urgency—he is particularly invested in these issues—but perhaps the most remarkable aspect of his argument is that it is even being made in the first place. Nearly half a century after Amiri Baraka’s *Blues People*, it would seem that we are still grappling with the relationship between Black music and Black identity within the larger context of American society. Banfield, in more of a continuation of these earlier ideas than a revision of them, argues that such connections are vital not only to the creation of music, but also to understanding African–American contributions to the American cultural landscape.

Banfield’s ideas are useful for the current discussion on a number of levels. First, extending the work Baraka began with *Blues People* and *Black Music*, Banfield places the music in a prominent position in his discussion. While obviously a result of his background, the current ubiquity of Black music in the culture industry writ large enables him to connect to other areas, including economics, media, fashion, and—especially useful for the current discussion—visual arts. Second, Banfield draws on a number of approaches—from the aforementioned music-centeredness of Baraka, to

Asante's afrocentrism, to Gilroy's critique of commodification—and in doing so, illustrates the continued relevance of these issues in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Thus, Banfield's project makes a useful tool in that it ties together a number of ongoing critical approaches to Black music, and underscores their present usefulness in both academic and popular contexts.

At the center of Banfield's project is the outlining of "a philosophy driven by practiced codes, supported by an overarching aesthetic, and created by connected artists" (49). These codes both shape and result from the ideals and aesthetics of a culture, disseminated through its various art forms, whether consciously or not. Though Banfield gives artists and musicians the job of marking and maintaining these codes, his theory is grounded in populism. Banfield insists upon a symbiotic relationship between the artist (including his/her works) and the culture (as practiced by "the folks") to which the artist belongs. Banfield's philosophy is motivated by a concern for history, the recognition of unique artistic voices, an engagement with social themes, and the construction and distribution of the images, rituals, and expressions of Black culture (23).

Black expressive forms—like music—both contain and inform Black cultural codes. Moreover, Black music's ubiquity in contemporary American society (and in the market) both extends its reach and heightens its impact within this context. Taken together, these factors place Black music in a central position with respect to the processes of culture formation. Thus, references to elements of Black music—whether forms, structures, practices, repertoires, or merely intertextual allusions—can be used to tie non-musical artforms to these Black cultural codes through what Banfield calls "the unique aesthetics of Black musical expression (94)." Visual artists, like the ones discussed below, can use Black music as a means of tapping into the aesthetics, processes, and values of Black culture in the U.S.

My interest in the relationship between African-American music and contemporary African-American visual art began in earnest in the fall of 2008, when I was approached by Julie McGee, a colleague at the University of Delaware, to collaborate on a project exploring this theme, which resulted in an exhibition entitled *Sound:Print:Record: African American Legacies*. Rather than just showcasing works inspired by or featuring music and musicians, we spent the better part of a year reading, listening, and meeting with Black artists, while discussing with them the role that music plays in African-American visual arts. For many of the artists we spoke with or studied, music seemed to provide a framework for the creation, performance, and interpretation of Black identit(ies), both individual and collective. (McGee and Carson 2009). The emphasis in this paper is on performance and interpretation, as the wide variety of artistic expressions

we observed demonstrated the multiple readings and articulations of blackness available to individuals at the close of the second millennium. In the works we surveyed, there seems to be a division: whereas many works by earlier artists appear to capture or depict romanticized elements of a now lost past, contemporary works of the twenty-first century are more apt to attempt an engagement with Black histories—real or imagined—as a means of making political and/or personal statements about that past.² Grainge’s “golden age” has been replaced by a more insistent criticism of the legacies we, as a society, have inherited.

What changed? Our experience in curating the exhibition suggests that many African-American contemporary artists and musicians are, generally, hyper-aware of processes of commodification, and are mindful of the ways in which the reception of their works is affected by the kinds of cooptation of Black culture addressed in Banfield’s work. Thus, many tend to use their art to police, undermine, and ultimately reclaim control over ideas of history and memory, whether personal, communal, or cultural. This was evident in several recent (post-2000) works we included as a part of the *Sound:Print:Record* exhibition.³

As one example, I would point to *After an Afternoon*, a 2008 installation by Whitfield Lovell (Figure 1). Lovell is a New York-based African-American artist and a 2007 MacArthur Fellow. Lovell’s works show a preoccupation with bygone eras, often integrating period artifacts that he repurposes to make powerful personal statements about the past (Otterness 2005). He is perhaps best known for his life-sized portraits based on African-American vintage photographs, which he reproduces on large pieces of wood, furniture, or other found objects.

At first glance, the work appears to be intensely nostalgic, constructed as it is of distressed vintage radios. Bakelite and wood grain are punctuated by shocks of pastel pink and seafoam green. But upon closer inspection, the work appears to critique notions of a fixed and romanticized idea of the past.

To begin with, sound is central to the work. It includes a soundtrack ostensibly emanating from the radios themselves, despite the fact that the radios are not plugged in. This literal disconnectedness highlights the gulf that exists between *then* and *now*, and offers a clue about how this work engages with the past. The sounds, it seems, are merely echoes; past as it is recalled, not as it was. We are discouraged from trusting what we see, hear, and, thus, remember.

The piece utilizes three superimposed sonic layers: a Walter Winchell broadcast, an excerpt of CBS radio’s *The Beulah Show*, and two performances by Billie Holiday. The inclusion of Walter Winchell, the ever-present voice of WWII-era radio, seems to situate us in a particular historical moment



Figure 1: Whitfield Lovell, “After an Afternoon.” Courtesy of Whitfield Lovell and DC Moore Gallery.

(the 1940s) as a sonic-temporal reference point. The foundations of this reference point are shaky, however, given Winchell’s reputation for gossip, scandal, and dubious reportage. Again, the past as we know it is not to be taken at face value.

The Beulah Show, which ran on CBS radio from 1945 until 1954, also presents us with a complicated picture of history. The series focused on the weekly adventures of the Henderson family, viewed from the perspective of their African-American “domestic,” Beulah Brown. Though the character was created in 1939, it was not until the third season of the radio show (1947) that Beulah would actually be voiced by an African-American woman (initially, Academy Award winner Hattie McDaniel, though Ethel Waters would play the character after its move to TV). Prior to that, the role was performed by a series of white males (Dates and Barlow 1993, Kolbert 1993). Thus, the *Beulah* soundtrack represents both the media’s (quite literal) appropriation of African-American culture and identity, and an early attempt by African-Americans to wrest back control of their own representation.

These sounds are woven together by recordings of Billie Holiday’s

performances of “Yesterdays” and “Strange Fruit.” One of the most iconic African–American performers, the mere inclusion of Holiday’s highly recognizable voice in the sonic landscape of *After an Afternoon* ties that work to the kinds of Black expressive practices that are highlighted in Banfield’s philosophy. As we grapple with the issues of representation stirred by references to *The Beulah Show*, the presence of Holiday’s voice—as an index of the (missing) Black performing body—enables the installation as a whole to draw upon Black aesthetics in a way that highlights the absence of the Black subject.

Furthermore, while Kern & Harbach’s “Yesterdays” seems a rather straightforward evocation of the past, its pairing with “Strange Fruit”—Jewish–American songwriter Abel Meeropol’s musical response to a lynching photograph—forces a re–reading of it that complicates the impulse to hear it as nostalgic. Taken together, these works certainly recall the past, but it is not a past to be lamented as lost. Our relationship to that past is ambiguous: it is a past that we both want to forget it, and need to remember. Here, music works to evoke and disrupt our view of the past, compelling us to confront the darker moments of our history. Lovell’s piece references modes of nostalgia that are familiar to us, but its self–awareness enables it to avoid being nostalgic itself. Through the work’s intertextuality, the past, history, and memory collapse upon themselves, leaving behind the question: *What does the past have yet to teach us?* To that end, the piece can be read as a cautionary tale about the limitations, ambiguities, and even dangers of nostalgia.

One might consider the musical group the Carolina Chocolate Drops to be the musical analogue to Lovell’s visual approach, incorporating—in their own way—a sort of “found object” aesthetic. In the same way that Lovell reconfigures discarded or forgotten *materials*, the Carolina Chocolate Drops draw from discarded or forgotten *musical traditions*—namely, Black string bands. Currently built around Rhiannon Giddens, Dom Flemons, Adam Matta, and Hubby Jenkins, the predominately African–American quartet (Giddens is of mixed heritage) has built a solid reputation within roots and folk music circles as gifted interpreters of string band music.

Or should we say *re*–interpreters? Beginning in 2005, several of the musicians who would come to be known as the Carolina Chocolate Drops began an informal apprenticeship under Joe Thompson, considered to be one of the last of the Black Piedmont fiddlers.⁴ In subsequent years, the group—no doubt riding the wave of the roots music revival of the past decade—continued to perform a mixture of their mentor’s repertoire, original works, and even roots–inspired covers of songs from other genres (Farris 2008).

While they themselves recognize that (what some may perceive as) the

novelty of African–American roots music performers may have led to their early and rapid success, they represent a continuation of a tradition, not a departure. The contributions of African–American genres and musicians to American folk, traditional, or roots music have been largely underappreciated of late, displaced by more the common narratives of blues and jazz development (with one of the few exceptions being Conway 1995). While it is true that the folk revival of the 50s and 60s was critical in helping gain recognition for an entire generation of African–American blues and folk musicians, the largely white faces of that revival (Odetta notwithstanding!) and the rock music that came out of it have contributed to an erasure of the Black influence in the ensuing years.⁵ As performers, the Carolina Chocolate Drops reclaim some of this lost legacy, reinserting African–American voices in places where they have typically been absent or silenced.

Like Lovell’s work, however, this is not an expression of loss or longing, but rather a corrective. Take, for example, the performance of “Snowden’s Jig” from their 2010 Grammy–winning effort. Subtitled “Genuine Negro Jig” (also the name of the album), it refers to a composition attributed to the prominent blackface minstrel performer, Daniel Decatur Emmett. Some disagreement exists as to the true authorship of this piece, however, with some claiming that Emmett took the song—as well as his most famous composition, “Dixie”—from his Black neighbors, the Snowden family of Ohio (Fiskin 1995). The Carolina Chocolate Drops’ re–christening of the melancholy tune is therefore an overtly political act of re–appropriation, one intended to recover lost historical narratives. Such a move not only sheds light on the roles played by Black composers and performers in early American music, but also forces us to confront the means and reasoning behind their exclusion in the first place.

Discontinuity and disjuncture are common enough elements of African–American conceptions of history, influenced as they are by that discontinuity *par excellence*, the middle passage. With this in mind, one must consider the effects of such ruptures upon individual or community identity formation. What is the end result of gaps in the historical record? How are our experiences of the present affected by the histories we have been given? Or, put more plainly: what would the present look like if the narratives of our past included things like *Black roots music*?

While their acoustic cover of African–American R&B singer Blu Cantrell’s 2001 single “Hit ‘Em Up Style” (from *So Blu*) may at first seem to be a tongue–in–cheek answer to such lofty questions, the Carolina Chocolate Drops’ performance of this song goes a long way towards reshaping our understanding of the relationship between the past and the present in Black music. A call for jilted women to get back at their lovers by spending all

of their money, “Hit ‘Em Up Style” was the breakout hit of Cantrell’s debut album. In the Carolina Chocolate Drops’ version, however, the aural mismatch of the fiddle, beatbox (Adam Matta), and Gidden’s take on Cantrell’s lyrics may initially seem somewhat unusual. Listening closely, however, we realize that these two performances are, in fact, not that far apart.

In terms of content, the song belongs to a long tradition of “woman scorned” songs, stretching back at least to works like Ma Rainey’s “Don’t Fish in My Sea,” Bessie Smith’s “Ain’t Gonna Play No Second Fiddle,” and countless others. The natural minor outlined by the melody gives the song a modal tinge, one that connects this song to the earlier folk songs that form the core of the Carolina Chocolate Drops’ repertoire. Both versions have a distinct rhythmic groove, the result of moderate tempo and significant inflection on weak beats. The clarity and power of Gidden’s voice certainly doesn’t take away from the Carolina Chocolate Drops’ performance, either. But the point is not that the Carolina Chocolate Drops’ version can *sound like* contemporary R&B. Rather, in this track, the Carolina Chocolate Drops recover some of the possibilities of Black musical expression perhaps lost by the exclusion of roots music from the narrative of Black music history. Bringing their tradition in line with contemporary Black musics, they emphasize both the continuities and discontinuities between them. If nostalgia entails looking back at the past through the lens of the present, this example inverts such a definition. The Carolina Chocolate Drops offer us a view of the present—or at least a potential present—viewed from the perspective of a newly rediscovered past. Again, the effect is decidedly *un*-nostalgic. Its themes are not distance and loss, but immediacy and recovery. This instills in both the music and its history a sense of novelty, vitality, and relevance that is key to the performers’ sustained engagement with the politics of representation. As the Carolina Chocolate Drops themselves say: “It is OK to mix it up and go where the spirit moves” (Carolina Chocolate Drops 2011).

If, as scholars such as Banfield argue, commodification, focus groups, and marketing departments have severed (or at the very least, concealed) the ties between Black musics and Black cultural codes, then examples like this represent an attempt to attenuate the effects of such processes. But the goal is not to show how this or that music or genre is or is not “Black.” Superficial similarities like lyrical content or mode do not go very far. Rather, it is a question of understanding the roles that such performances play in constructing alternative representations of Blackness, and how we might use these alternatives to create an awareness of the methods and meanings behind Black representation in popular media.

The “methods of popular media” lie at the heart of African–American artist Jefferson Pinder’s multi-year work, entitled the *Missionary Project*.⁶

Part performance–art, part social experiment, the *Missionary Project* addresses issues of Black identity and representation on the subways of Mexico City. Central to this project is a mix tape, created by Pinder, which contains audio examples representing many facets of Black identity. Donning a backpack with built-in speakers, Pinder spends days riding the city's transportation system, the sounds of “blackness” emanating from him—a Black male—as he sells these CDs to passengers on the train for ten pesos each. In Pinder's own words:

I went forth to create a “mix-CD” of music that would represent my culture, my home [the US], and myself . . . a product that represents identity in a way that is truthful to my knowledge of what “blackness” is . . . (Pinder 2009; quoted in McGee and Carson 2009, 21)

Pinder continues, noting that he:

. . . use[s] music to inform and enhance the listener's understanding of the depth of the Afro-American experience and in some way present a complete and dynamic non-commercial interpretation of the power of black music . . . (21)

By doing this, Pinder hopes to create a space for public dialogue about identity writ large. Pinder's focus on Mexico City is motivated, in part, by that country's complicated past vis-à-vis its indigenous peoples, its role in the African slave trade, and contemporary immigration issues. These issues are heightened by the government's socialist philosophies, wherein Pinder believes “minorities and their interests are swallowed up by mainstream culture” (Pinder 2009).

Pinder sees himself as an “ambassador,” a role which he considers to be both a “burden and a privilege” (Pinder 2009). Music's part in this is vital, since it is through the normally highly commodified medium of music that he makes statements about the commercial nature of Black representation. By using the industry's own products—recombined and repackaged—he contradicts commercialized representations of Black identity. The mix-CD contains, among other things, tracks by seminal Black artists like James Brown and Gil Scott-Heron, Shaggy's “Chica Bonita,” and excerpts from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s “I Have Been to the Mountaintop” speech. It also includes a Mexican folk song for children and audio from the Apollo 11 launch. While Pinder's works adds a global perspective that is somewhat beyond the purview of this article, it is important to note the variety of works he considers to be “black.” Like the Carolina Chocolate Drops' set list, this variety complicates common notions of blackness and reveals the exceedingly personal nature of identity formation.



Figure 2: Jefferson Pinder, “Music Missionaries.” Courtesy of G-Fine Art.

This complexity is made visible in another of Pinder’s works, *Music Missionaries* (2008), a woodblock print which adorns the front of the CDs Pinder makes and sells (Figure 2). Iconic representations of African–American musicians (including Robert Johnson and Billie Holiday), scenes from Black life, and images of slavery are juxtaposed against African folk elements and Mexican *calaveras*. As in his live “performances,” these themes are unified by a train motif signifying motion, change, or progress. Art historian Julie McGee sums it up thusly:

Pinder’s work activates cultural constructions of African American culture and deploys aural and visual codes of signification that at once invoke a ‘black familiar’ and then destabilize tautological relationships between African American art and sound. (McGee and Carson 2009, 21)

Such “destabilization” is the focus of the present study. By placing elements of African–American culture in a broader (international) context, Pinder questions US–centric ideas of blackness, while simultaneously using those same conceptions to challenge problematic post–racial policies in Mexico.

Thus far, I have tried to uncover some shared elements between African–American visual arts and music—elements through which artists and musicians reshape conceptions of the past. My final pair of examples, I hope, will illustrate just how entwined art, music, and history can be, and how this interconnectedness can be used to great artistic, intellectual, and political effect.

Ellington Robinson, an African–American visual artist specializing in mixed media, often turns to musical topics or materials in his projects. The son of a US diplomat, he spent much of his youth divided between Washington, D.C. and St. Croix. In the Virgin Islands, his family lived on a former plantation—which Robinson considered to be “a constant reminder of our past”—a fact which is evident in virtually all of his works (Robinson 2011). Similarly, jazz pianist and composer Jason Moran describes his music as “music that starts from a historical place” (MacArthur Foundation Interview 2010). Moran, a Houston–born musician who was later mentored by Jaki Byard at the Manhattan School of Music, has built a solid reputation in the jazz world based on his unique mixture of old and new approaches to the music. Both artists are concerned with history and its meanings, and—born in the same year (1975)—they share similar musical interests and influences. They grew up alongside contemporary American popular musics (most notably, hip–hop), but both cite genres like blues and jazz as important influences, too—Robinson through his father’s record collection, and Moran through his enduring fascination with Thelonious Monk. This musical eclecticism proved to be influential on their artistic development, as many of their projects involve an assimilation of these elements. Despite their different artistic areas—visual arts and music, respectively—a common thread between their works is a processual approach. That is, many of their pieces actively engage their subject matter and perform a re–reading of it staged specifically for us—the audience. Thus, history is not past; it is immediate. Each artist sees himself as a participant in a history that is constantly being (re)written. Works like Robinson’s 2007 sculpture *The Last is Preparing to Leave* (Figure 3) or Moran’s recording of “Planet Rock” (from *Modernistic*, 2002) reflect each artist’s eclecticism, blurring the lines between genres, styles, or historical period.

The Last is Preparing to Leave is a sculpture constructed of a metallic cassette tape, gel, toys, and hip–hop cassette labels. The image of the train reappears here, symbolizing the movement of the music (in this case, the hip–hop alluded to in the affixed labels) that helped Robinson retain connections to his African–American community in the US while living in the Virgin Islands. Moreover, the juxtaposition of hip–hop and the train also recalls the prominent role of subway cars in early urban hip–hop culture: tagging trains as a means of gaining recognition for your crew outside of

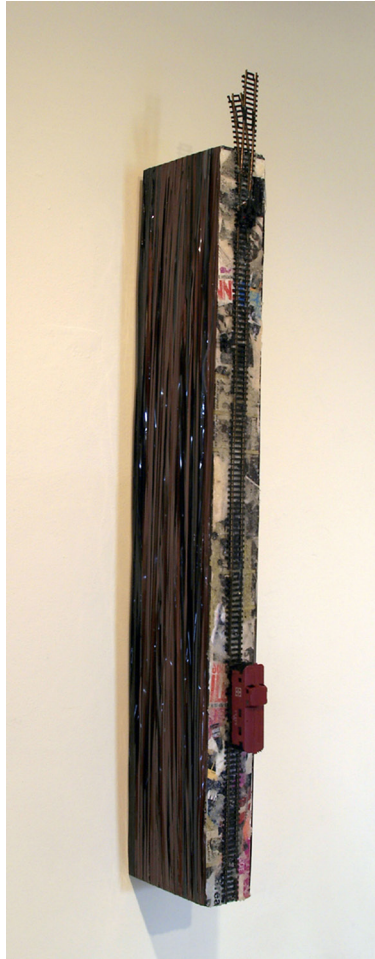


Figure 3: Ellington Robinson, “The Last is Preparing to Leave.” Courtesy of Ellington Robinson.

your local neighborhood. Thus, these tracks (in both senses of the word) served as a primary means of communication both within and beyond a given community. Though music is not present here in a sonic sense, its use as a symbol points to its power as a means for forging connections between individuals and their communities or cultures.

Moran’s music is a bit more overt in its nod to the past—he directly quotes his musical progenitors. Memories and influences are re-enacted and reconsidered in a very present way. As a cover of a track by the seminal early hip-hop DJ, Afrika Bambaataa, Moran’s version begins with a recreation of the original track’s signature Roland 808 beat, reproduced on acoustic piano

through the insertion of paper between the instrument's strings. Moran continues by not only playing the track's melodic hook—a sample taken from “Trans–Europe Express” by German electronic pop pioneers Kraftwerk—but also by emulating the rapped call–and–response vocal interjections of the MCs (members of Bambaataa's group, Soulsonic Force). In an interesting take on the straight–ahead jazz practice of improvising on a given chord progression, Moran uses these elements as a starting point for an exploration of the sonic (not harmonic) world of “Planet Rock.” This cover therefore lies at the intersection of jazz, early hip–hop, electronic pop music (through the Kraftwerk reference), and the art music *avant garde* (through the use of prepared piano).

While the allusions contained in Moran's “Planet Rock” are perhaps more obvious to the casual observer than those in Robinson's work, they are no less effective. Both works speak by layering references to earlier works and disparate genres, and infusing them with highly personalized experiences, associations, and connections. This reconfiguring of the familiar challenges master–narratives of style and genre development, and—often linked to these concepts—temporality itself. Ellington's and Moran's works are always intensely *present*, despite their frequent references to earlier times, places, and musics.

Moran's performance of “You've Got To Be Modernistic” (also from *Modernistic*), first recorded by James P. Johnson in the 1930s, shows the younger musician's indebtedness to early virtuosos like Johnson. But, despite the original's place in the canon, Moran doesn't just “cover” the tune; this is not a rehearsal of obsessive nostalgia. Rather, Moran engages the earlier recording in a conversation, quoting it, repeating its figures, but just as often stopping to give a particular musical fragment special attention. In some instances, he fixatedly repeats a fragment, turning it over and over in his hands—seeing what makes it tick—before picking up where he left off. This process results in a work that may *sound* different than Johnson's original, but that difference is more a result of a process of interrogation than a conscious departure. Obviously, Moran draws from the jazz tradition (improvising on a harmonic model), but he also departs from it in fundamental ways. He frequently interrupts the harmonic progression, rhythmic flow, and pulse in a way that clouds the form and structure of the original work. The effect is telling: rather than using the original as a vehicle for improvisation, his version specifically refers to Johnson's version through quotation and reference. Both versions remain vehicles for virtuosity. Moran's is a new and separate reading, to be sure, but it is a reading that is acutely aware of its relationship to its predecessor, to an extent that goes beyond mere homage. Moran *deconstructs* the earlier work out of curiosity, respect, or even reverence.

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Here, we are hearing the *process* of engaging with the past. Moran succeeds in retaining that which is “modernistic” about the piece, but he does so for a contemporary audience.

A similar move informs the final work I would like to consider. Robinson’s 2006 collage, *Melanin in the Music I* (Figure 4), is a visual work constructed of material elements taken from old LPs, mostly from his father’s



Figure 4: Ellington Robinson, “Melanin in the Music I.” Courtesy of Ellington Robinson.

collection. Album covers, inner sleeves, and even the vinyl itself comprise this dense and textured work. The album art is barely visible, obscuring the individual recordings included in the collage like so many familiar yet forgotten tunes. Nevertheless, a cursory glance may reveal a few of the more iconic jazz cover art examples of the 1960s, including Dexter Gordon’s *Go*, Lee Morgan’s *The Sidewinder*, and Eric Dolphy’s *Out to Lunch*—albums which evoke a particular moment rooted in mid-century Afromodernist aesthetics.

But this evocation is layered. In addition to the impressionistic use of the cover art images, the backs of the albums are arranged so as to form a regular, geometric pattern. With its mixture of strict grids, angled intersections, and large circles, the pattern recalls the footprint of Robinson's own Washington, DC. Built by slaves, and labeled a "chocolate city" since the late-1950s, DC has long been a lightning rod for issues of race and class—heightened by its political importance. The thick layering of sepia in this work—*melanin*, perhaps—serves to remind us of DC's Black legacy by quite literally re-inscribing blackness onto the geography of a city whose white-washed domes and monuments often overshadow the struggles of the large, mostly Black population (a population which still lacks voting congressional representation). Through his use of musical artifacts and materials, Robinson succeeds in offering a corrective to established narratives of American history that recognize DC as a seat of power without acknowledging the ongoing struggles of its least powerful residents. Like in the Mos Def example with which we began, Robinson seeks to reclaim a history that has been systematically ignored, erased, and rewritten. And—similar to Moran's performance, as well—he does this by confronting this history from a highly individualistic point of view.

Black music, both as a product of African-American culture and an increasingly *transcultural* commodity, lies at the center of debates about race, culture, nationalism, and capitalism. Each of the works considered here engages with music in different ways, but their shared concern is an awareness of music's role in offering a re-interpretation of an African-American past—or, perhaps more to the point—ideas about that past: art as *historiography*. As in the earlier discussion of nostalgia, it could be said that the works included in this discussion are not so much "black" (whatever that may mean) as they are "about blackness." They attempt to illustrate and challenge the many ways blackness, or even history, can be performed. In contrast to the hollow rehearsal of the past—*nostalgia*—the works discussed above invoke the past as a challenge to our way of thinking. Consequently, the past is made present, and its legacy is not one of loss, but of potential.

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Notes

1. In the track, Prince laments: “Don’t you miss the feeling music gave you back in the day?”
2. To be fair, many of these earlier works are products of different times, and as such had different goals—the work of photographer P.H. Polk (1898–1984) being a telling example. Polk’s oeuvre, which is dominated by portraits of prominent African–Americans taken during his tenure as the official photographer of the Tuskegee Institute, reflects an interest in representing the variety of Black experiences, and as such are exceptional works of their time. For contemporary audiences, however, they perhaps lack the urgency of post–Civil Rights Era activism.
3. The majority of the exhibition was drawn from works in the Paul R. Jones Collection housed at the University of Delaware. To this, we added works by artists whose approaches to the relationship between music and visual art reflected or enhanced the spirit of the exhibition, with particular attention to living artists (mostly from the Mid–Atlantic region).
4. The Piedmont region is located along the eastern part of the United States, between the Appalachian Mountains and the coastal regions along the Atlantic. It stretches at least as far north as eastern Pennsylvania/New Jersey, and as far south as Alabama. The musical traditions of this region, while certainly related to those of the Upland South (Appalachian music), are distinct in that they show more influence of blues and early ragtime.
5. A telling example of this can be seen by comparing the original release of Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music* (1952)—a racially varied recording which helped launch the folk revival—with the 1999 tribute album *The Harry Smith Project: An Anthology of American Folk Revisited*. The latter album features covers of several of the works that appeared on the original anthology, now performed by mostly white musicians. Moreover, despite the inclusion of a number of works by Black performers on the soundtrack to the 2000 Coen Brothers film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, the roots revival it sparked was certainly coded white, as made evident by the concert film *Down From the Mountain*, which documented a concert of music from the film performed at the historic Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, TN.
6. Videos documenting this project are available via Jefferson Pinder’s website, www.jeffersonpinder.com/newsite/work/missionary-project [accessed 10–01–2011].

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