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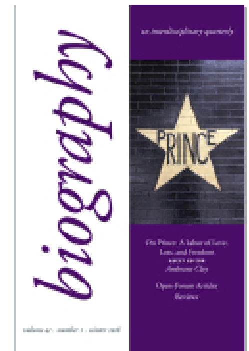

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PRINCE AND THE EROTICS OF DEMOCRACY

GREG TATE

Black American music, as we know it, was born in rebellion and horror, fantasy and desire, slave camps and starships, ring shouts and juke joints, barrelhouses, barber shops, and buckets of blood.

We hear the background radiation. We hear the sonic refusal of Black Civilizations to submit to the Barbarian delusion: their unfulfilled wish-projection that several millennia of African cunning and cosmology had somehow wound up bereft of human features.

No Gods, no memory, no love, no history, culture, or intellects.

Ha. As if, only.

In his visionary and prophetic 1903 essay collection *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois identifies the earliest genre of those sonic refusals as "The Sorrow Songs." Du Bois rightly declares them the only sign from America that human life might still exist there among the wages of sin, gin, genocide, and technology. The Sorrow Songs affirmed two things: deep inner life among our enslaved ancestors and a coded language for subverting bondage with tonal espionage and melodic counter-terrorism.

Duke Ellington was once asked why his music was so dissonant. The Duke replied, "Dissonance is our way of life in America. We are something apart yet an integral part" (150). Ellington also said, "Art is dangerous. That's one of its attractions. When it ceases to be dangerous you don't want it" (qtd. in Burns).

The blues were Ellington's dissonant weapon of choice, and over the course of a six-decade career he deployed them in myriad ways to seduce and tease out artfully the tension between his freewheeling and rebellious bluesy people and the democratic ideal. His compatriot Louis Armstrong did likewise.

So did their immediate antecedents of the bebop generation and the rock and rollers who followed them in sly and seditious musical contentiousness.

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Up until then, Blackfolk in the South were being terrorized by rapes and sexually motivated lynchings.

The boppers and the rockers defied laws against sex congress between men and women on opposite sides of the racial caesura. Those musicians themselves never took on sex and race as a primary thematic, but the transgressive and transracial appeal of the bop and rock rendered explicit expression superfluous.

The R&B of the 1960s—epitomized and exemplified by the Motown sound of the urban north and the southern soul sound of the Memphis Stax-Volt label—deliberately moved up the pop charts and into once prohibitive venues: Hollywood, Broadway, and Vegas. It did so with Jim Crow–busting tunes that underscored the civil rights movement's mission of desegregating and destabilizing America.

The jazz of the era went further in heightening the dissonance at play in American racial life and strife by invoking chaos to achieve velocity and point their improvs toward the cosmos. Sun Ra, Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler, and John Coltrane were the prophets, fathers, sons, and holy spirit of this movement that we also identify under the rubric of Freedom Swang.

These prophetic voices in jazz and R&B begat our music's next wave of creative pioneers, the forgers of Black Rock 1.0: James Brown, Sly Stone, Jimi Hendrix, and Arthur Lee's band Love. These avatars, in turn, begat the electronic jazz of Miles Davis, Freddy Hubbard, Tony Williams, Herbie Hancock, Weather Report, and Return to Forever, and inspired the instrumentalist-led band movement of 1970s funk 'n' roll: Curtis Mayfield, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Santana, the Parliament Funkadelic, Gil Scott-Heron, Labelle, Betty Davis, the Isley Brothers, the Jacksons, the Last Poets, Earth, Wind & Fire, Rufus and Chaka Khan, Maxayn, Mandrill, the Ohio Players, Philly International, and legions more.

All of these groups maintained Black music's centuries-deep tradition of producing a bevy of covert and overt liberation songs, fight songs, and radically romantic ballads.

If you were a musically inquisitive young Black pop songwriter in the American midwest in the 1960s and 1970s, you put in long hours learning as much as you could about these innovative turns in Black pop theory and mysticism. You craved to know the esoteric philosophical underpinnings, which inspired them to represent post-revolutionary Blackness in sound, color, style, swagger, and magical movement: the Black Power, Black Consciousness, Black Arts, Black Panther, and Black Liberation Army movements, and the Blaxploitation cinema figured heavily in there, too. The esteem in which many of the aforementioned performers held the Beatles, Bob Dylan, Frank

Zappa, David Bowie, and Led Zeppelin as generational fellow travelers also need be noted—especially as we leap ahead to the conscious reggae movement of the 1970s, which in Jamaica and London was embedded in violent street protests against Imperialism and police brutality-enabled Thatcherism. These protests motivated punk rocker tunesmiths like Joe Strummer to aim his guitar at the war on the working class. Punk rock, funk, freedom swing, electronic jazz, and conscious reggae helped beget political hip-hop nearly a decade later. A movement that found pop currency vigor when its principal targets—Reaganomics and the Reagan—enabled the introduction of crack cocaine to urban communities nationwide and ceded ground to the Clinton administration and its advance of the prison-industrial complex.

Amid these eruptive histories the phenom we know as Prince was born, thrust, and parried.

The beyond brilliant Black science fiction author Samuel Ray Delany had already predicted Prince's brand of post-psychedelic free-loving second coming with the publication of his 1968 novel *Nova*. That book features three characters whom Prince could have played at varying points in his career. There's the psychedelic "gypsy" storm bringer Mouse, there's the book's snotty, sociopathic, and incestuous villain whose name is Prince Red, and then there's the book's antihero starship captain Lorq von Ray, the aristocratic but anarchic scion of a Nigerian-Nordic marriage, a brinkmanship-driven character whose revolutionary actions throw the galaxy's power hierarchies into chaos, not least by diving his multiethnic crew and ship into an exploding sun and retrieving energies that democratize wealth distribution and technological development in the galaxy. To further seal the prophetic connection between Prince and Delany, the author's most well-known book, a 976-page novel called *Dhalgren*, centers on the mythic post-apocalyptic adventures of an omnisexual protagonist called the Kid.

What our musical Prince's vision of future America shares most with Delany's, however, is this: that the future will be populated by lots of extremely gifted Blackfolk, First Nation folk, queerfolk, Mexican folk, and womenfolk, and even the occasionally movie-star-handsome white male cowboy or space jockey.

In several of Delany's short fictions, we learn how troubling mutant sexuality can be for mere humans. We also learn how freaking hot for mutant violence regular folk become once they realize the mutants' sheer presence is enough to induce future shock and obsolescence.

In Delany's work, as in Prince's, the pleasures of Black and Othered Beings always reveal a murderous twin shadow coiled around the narrative. Delany tells us these mutants can dive deeper into uncharted realms of space

than less-evolved humans—to places where the laws of physics are warped beyond measure and non-mutant humanoids damn near go insane from even thinking about Going Out There.

In the 1980s, Prince, the crack-carrying Reagan regime, and hip-hop all hit the Black community at roughly the same time.

Never has a resistance movement seemed more readymade to outflank the enemy in a split-gendered pincer move.

Let's think about the degree to which early Prince is defined by an alchemical mess of angsty teen rebellion and glam-inspired sexual androgyny. Is this the degree to which he perfectly mirrors and mimics a frisky pre-AIDS sexual pop moment in America's world? Is this a moment when he could freely assume the mantle, occupy the position, and play the role of bedroom liberator. Take on that role of vanguard buccaneer of carnal and orgasmic pleasure, which had already been laid out by the meanest of his blue-skint and Blues-wailing ancestren: Bessie Smith, Little Richard, Jimi Hendrix, Frank Zappa, Betty Davis, Chaka Khan, David Bowie, Grace Jones, George Clinton, Bootsy Collins, Rick James, and Ntozake Shange?

Starman Prince realized the cultural battleground of the future would be fought over what all bodies that had been othered by the state did to pleasure themselves, did to make themselves. The outcome of the war would be determined by what folks used to make themselves feel real good under pressure.

The history of Black Music, from the Sorrow Songs to freedom swing is a history of Black bodies liberating other Black bodies in the hold and the clutch and the caress and the kiss and the cream. And Prince is our music's most indispensable diarist of the power surges felt after these liberations.

Two final thoughts:

1) A sister once said to me that Michael Jackson was her man on the dance floor but Prince her number-one music man for creative stimulation in the bedroom.

2) "If you can't be free then at least be a mystery," says the writer Farah Jasmine Griffin via her book-length meditation on Billie Holiday.

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