The Black Musician and the White City

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In April 1956, Nat “King” Cole took the stage in Birmingham, Alabama, before a white audience of 3,500. Cole was the final performer in an integrated tour featuring singer June Christy and the Ted Heath Orchestra—the first British jazz orchestra to tour the United States. As Cole took his place center stage, someone in the audience yelled racial slurs. Cole ignored the jeers and began to sing his recent hit, “Little Girl.” He was only a few bars into the song when five white men ran up the aisles of the theater, jumped on to the stage, and attacked him. The police were able to rescue Cole and capture the five men. Due to his injuries, Cole was unable to finish the performance for the white audience, but was able to perform later that evening, in the same venue, for an all-Black audience.

In the days that followed, the police reported that the five men all had records for previous violence and general misconduct. Furthermore, four of the men were members of the local Citizens’ Council. When asked why they attacked Cole, one of the men explained he could not stand a white audience applauding a Black man. Had the attackers’ plans been successful, there would have been 150 men present to attack Cole. Luckily for the singer, only five men showed up that night.\(^1\)

After the attack, Cole returned to Chicago, where he had grown up singing in his father’s church and studying music in the public schools.\(^2\) He hoped to find solace and further medical treatment for his injuries there. While he recovered, he found himself assailed by the Chicago Defender and the NAACP because they wanted all Black performers to refuse to play before segregated audiences. Alive in the minds of the newspaper editors and the NAACP was the Montgomery Bus Boycott then
underway in Alabama and the Supreme Court, which at that time was
hearing a case regarding the segregation of interstate buses. By per-
forming in front of a segregated audience, Cole’s critics said he appeared to
be endorsing segregation. The newspaper called the attack a good les-
son for Cole and any other musician who was willing to perform under
such conditions. In response, Cole explained that both whites and Blacks
bought his recordings and that both groups deserved to see him perform.
He also explained that the five men had wanted to start a race riot but
failed because the rest of the audience did not join them. Furthermore,
Cole said that numerous white leaders, including the mayor of Birming-
ham, had apologized for the incident. For Cole, the reaction of the audi-
ence and the white leaders was an indication that the South was chang-
ing. Despite his explanations, the singer was unable to redeem himself in
the eyes of Black leaders for performing before segregated audiences until
he agreed to become a lifetime member of the NAACP and headlined
$1,000-a-plate fundraisers.³

The attack in Birmingham was not Cole’s last encounter with racism.
He had achieved immense popularity by 1956; his live performances were
sold out; all of his recordings were in the top ten for sales; and his audi-
ence was growing and racially diverse. Not surprisingly, late that same
year, Cole became the first African American to headline a network tele-
vision show. However, after only sixty weeks and record-breaking ratings,
NBC announced that Cole would not continue as host, citing his touring
schedule.

The truth behind the cancellation was that NBC had difficulty finding
sponsors and navigating protests from southern affiliates. Cole’s celebrity
friends guest-starred on his show in hopes of drawing in sponsors, but to
no avail. His popularity had created the possibility of hosting the show.
Fame also caused Cole to be caught squarely between the segregationists
of the South and the appeasers in the broadcast industry.⁴

When Cole took the stage in Birmingham, he was colliding with a his-
toric moment. He did not intend to become a symbol of the changes in the
music industry that made it possible for an African American performer
to become a superstar, nor did he intend to become a symbol of integra-
tion. All he was trying to do was perform and present a positive image of
African Americans. The men who attacked him saw his performance dif-
ferently. For southern segregationists, Black music and Black musicians
were part of what they perceived to be, in the words of Citizens’ Council
leaders, an NAACP “plot to mongrelize America by forcing Negro culture
on the South.” In the minds of Citizens’ Council members, Cole was as dangerous to the white community as rock and roll.

The Citizens’ Council was partly correct. Many African American performers were actively using their popularity among white teenagers to help integrate the South. If the fears of segregationists are any indication, these performers were finding success on the integration front. What the southern segregationists failed to understand or acknowledge was that there was a massive cultural change underway in the United States in the mid to late 1950s. To the white supremacists, the music and the musicians were representatives of “Negro Culture.” In actuality, the music was also illustrative of a growing white national audience responding to music and performers who embodied the urban African American culture of the Midwest, specifically Chicago.

The musicians of the Great Migration were returning South. The music that they brought to the South, and that spread throughout the nation in the 1950s, was an outgrowth of the rise in Black consciousness and self-importance that the Fisk University sociologists had noted in their 1940s study of the Mississippi Delta. When the musicians migrated, they went to Chicago, and other Midwest cities. As their music flourished, so did the musicians’ racial pride and cultural power. When they toured the United States, and specifically the South, their music represented the erosion of institutional segregation’s ability to control the spread of music from the northern cities to the Delta and to contain Black culture in the urban ghettos.

Fueling the growth in the popularity of the music was the rise in the Midwest of independent record producers, jukebox operators, and disc jockeys who, along with the touring musicians, made African American music accessible to a national audience. In so doing, the independent producers, distributors, and broadcasters mobilized the advantages afforded them in the Midwest and challenged the power of the major corporations to control product and distribution. Just as the white supremacists were challenging the emergence of the music into the mainstream culture, so too were the corporate leaders of the music industry.

One reason for the opposition to Black music was that wherever the musicians and the music went in the United States, discussion of civil rights followed. The musicians were changing the debate concerning integration. Up until now, integration was a discussion concerning rights in the public sphere—voting, buses, housing, and schools. However, every
time a white teenager bought tickets to see a Black performer or tuned
the radio to a Black station, the discourse concerning the appropriate
place of Blacks and Black culture became an issue of the private sphere—
teenagers’ bedrooms, teenagers’ hangouts, and teenagers’ cars.9

The rise in popularity of Black music was one element in a changing
culture that continued to demonstrate that white supremacists were los-
ing ground. For their part, the changes that Black musicians had endured
through southern racism, migration, and urban segregation were made
manifest in the music. The growth in the white audience and the trans-
formation of the regional music of the urban Midwest into a national
music meant that in the mid-1950s both the artists and their music had
emerged as more than an expression of Black dignity and survival. The
popularity of the music and musicians was an indication of a looming
national collision between those who were steadfast in their defense of
traditional race relations and those who danced in integrated clubs.10

“OFF-COLOR”: RACE MUSIC BY ANY OTHER NAME

The fight against Black popular music in the 1950s was not solely the
work of white supremacists. In 1951, African American poet Langston
Hughes voiced concerns about music played over loudspeakers outside of
record stores in Chicago’s Bronzeville neighborhood. Hughes was afraid
that children and the elderly would hear the lyrics of rhythm and blues.
Also in 1951, Chicago-based Jet magazine argued against the lyrics in
rhythm and blues recordings.11 In 1955, civic leaders from Houston’s Juve-
nile Delinquency and Crime Commission prepared a list of objectionable
records and the group forced all of the nine local radio stations to refrain
from playing the songs. The head of this group was Dr. H. A. Bullock, an
African American sociology professor at Texas Southern University.12 In
short, the move to suppress popular music was not entirely led by whites.
In addition, the music did not become of civic concern only when whites
became aware of it. The difference between the views of African Ameri-
can leaders and white leaders was that African American leaders saw the
music as a problem with the music industry, whereas white leaders more
often than not saw the “obscenity” of the music as rooted in the core of
Black culture, which they saw as a threat to white youth.

In the 1950s, the fear of the influence of Black culture on white youth
amounted to a domino theory of music in which it appeared that white youths were falling one by one into the abyss of Black culture. The opponents of the music argued that “popular music” was popular because the radio disc jockeys and jukeboxes made the music available to anyone regardless of age or race. Therefore, the music was dangerous because the spread of broadcast technology circumvented the power of institutional segregation to contain African American urban culture within the ghettos on the South Side of Chicago. Recorded music had disrupted the traditional power structures, and this made it more dangerous than the clubs on the Stroll in Chicago in the 1920s had ever been.¹³

Variety, the entertainment industry’s primary publication, articulated and solidified the fear of the influence of Black music on white youth. In a three-month-long campaign against rhythm and blues music during 1954–1955, Variety made it clear that the problem was Black culture influencing white kids. In condemning rhythm and blues, Variety used a language flexible enough that numerous songs fell within the boundaries of the definitions of “off-color”—a euphemism that the periodical used to link race with notions of “smut.” For instance, in an editorial titled “A Warning to the Music Business,” Variety accused the music industry of purposefully contaminating popular culture with Black culture. The editors described the dangerous lyrics as being phrases such as “rock and roll,” and terms like “hug” and “squeeze.” They characterized these “leer-ics” as “back fence language” and as “earthy dialogue” that “belonged in ‘art novels.””¹⁴

Variety added that the problem with the music was more than the lyrical content. “In the past,” the editors wrote, “such material was common enough but restricted to special places and out-and-out barrelhouses.” They continued, “today the ‘leer-ics’ are offered as standard popular music for general consumption, including consumption by teenagers.” While arguing that there was a suitable audience for this style of music, Variety asserted its accessibility of the music to white teenagers was the true problem.¹⁵ In fact, the editors hearkened back to the music of influential jazz musician “Jelly Roll” Morton, who had migrated to Chicago with the first wave of New Orleans musicians in the 1910s. In the 1920s, Variety had labeled Morton’s music as “smut.” In 1954, the editors revisited their previous calls to limit African American music by arguing that Morton was not a threat to society because he was in the “music underworld” and not the “main stream.”¹⁶ In other words, had the music continued to be limited to the South Side of Chicago, where Morton
performed, there would have been no need for concern. After all, the editors suggested, there was a reason why rhythm and blues was once called “race” or “Harlem” records. The crisis of American youth, according to the publication, stemmed from the fact that Black vernacular music, whether it was called rhythm and blues or “race” records, was no longer “limited to Harlemania.” The Variety editors had made it clear that race determined the music’s suitable audience. The “kids” in Harlem were not the same “kids” that Variety was seeking to protect. “Race” records were suitable for Harlem and “barrelhouses” because these represented contained cultural spaces defined by economics and by race.

In the context of the Cold War, Variety argued, the breach of the color line placed the nation in great peril. In 1954, the State Department was preparing to spend $2.25 million as “seed” money to fight the Cold War on the “Cultural Front.” It funded world tours of, among other things, the New York City Ballet, productions of Porgy and Bess, and jazz orchestras. By sending American culture abroad, the State Department hoped to promote what Variety called the “American way.” The State Department presented jazz, which included hiring Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie as cultural ambassadors, as an example of American ingenuity and independent spirit, rather than as a music created by one of most oppressed segments of the population of the United States. As a result, the “picture of America” presented to the Cold War world was defined and controlled by the standards of those at the center. The music of the periphery, such as rhythm and blues, was “lewd,” and, Variety argued, “it gives a very false picture of this country.” The questionable music was, according to the editors, “deplorable and contrary to the best interests of this country and democracy.” “What is bad for the youth of America is also bad for the youth of England and other countries where English is spoken or sung,” proclaimed Variety.

Variety was not alone in questioning the value of certain forms of popular music. Billboard, Variety’s rival publication, also referred to certain recordings as “off-color disks.” Unlike Variety, Billboard asked how “clever” lyrics could be separated from “obscene” ones and its editors contacted various small rhythm and blues labels for comment. Besserman of Apollo Records and Herman Lubinsky of Savoy Records denied ever putting out an “off-color” recording and argued that obscenity was an unfortunate interpretation on the part of the listener. The executives of the larger Atlantic Records, Ahmet Ertegun and Jerry Wexler, stated, “We endorse any movement against offensive content on records,” and,
like Savoy and Apollo, denied ever distributing obscene records. The Atlantic executives went further by saying, “it strikes us as unfortunate that rhythm and blues records are singled out for censure at this time when instances of questionable material abound in the pop and country music fields as well.” They called for every effort to be made “to facilitate a continuously wider acceptance” of rhythm and blues, “this basic American music.”

For Billboard, the success of rhythm and blues derived from the “intrinsic quality of its product, the lure of its exciting music, the craftsmanship of its a&r [artists and repertoire] men, the top quality of its artists.” Despite this glowing review, the editors of Billboard still felt the need to call for “the occasional distasteful disks” to be “weeded out” by “wise, tempered judgment” on the part of the radio stations. The editors argued that the broadcasting of questionable material was contrary to the “public good.” Therefore, it was a violation of the terms of broadcasting licenses of the stations and should attract the attention of the Federal Communications Commission. The licensing process, in part, motivated the television and radio industry’s sensitivity to the moral demands of the audience because, though the corporations owned the transmitters, the public owned the airwaves and thus could control content.

Billboard had an agenda in publishing this editorial: the editors did not want to be held responsible for the content of the music promoted in their magazine:

The Billboard’s Best Selling charts are not necessarily a carte blanche programming recommendation. These charts reflect sales. The stations using the charts should exercise judgment and eliminate from their programming disks which, in the station’s opinion, do not qualify as home entertainment. Adherence to this principle will reduce to a minimum the number of such disks which enter the best-selling category.

This cautionary statement concerning the use of the charts is interesting because it sought to distance the editors of Billboard from the playing of questionable music and place responsibility on the radio stations. However, the editors failed to note their own role in promoting music. When a song placed significantly on the top-twenty list, it then attracted the ire of the censorship movement. Writing the song, performing the song, and recording the song did not violate the public good. Under the Bill-
board and Variety arguments, the songs only endangered the public upon broadcasting—either on the radio or jukeboxes. In addition, the editors of Billboard saw the necessity for banning rhythm and blues, but did not discuss the questionable lyrics in the pop and country-and-western musical genres, which the executives of Apollo, Savoy, and Atlantic Records all noted as containing sexual content.

Though Variety and Billboard dominated coverage of the music industry, there were smaller publications defending the positions of niche markets. An example of the smaller publications is the Cash Box—a bi-weekly paper reporting on the jukebox industry. In September 1954, the Cash Box warned its subscribers of the problems that “dirty” rhythm and blues recordings could cause for the industry if cities and towns were to establish censorship boards. Its editors predicted that the music would be blamed for the rise in juvenile delinquency, and all evidence of “ameliorating delinquency conditions” would be ignored. The looming threat of censorship, which reformists justified by citing rising rates of juvenile delinquency manifested through violence at music shows, would hurt the entire jukebox industry, according to the editors. To survive, the Cash Box suggested that the industry censor itself.23

Audiences accessed the music through unregulated jukeboxes. Owners of the machines filled the jukeboxes with rhythm and blues music because the recordings were cheap and jukebox music did not need to be registered, thus bypassing BMI (Broadcast Music Incorporated) and the ASCAP’s (American Society of Composers, Authors, and Programmers) standards boards, which were the organizations that licensed music releases. On the surface, censoring jukeboxes appears to be a separate issue from the banning of music from the radio and from exportation. After all, Variety’s editors clearly said, they wanted to protect the “kids,” and jukeboxes represented the much-maligned “saloon” or “barrelhouse” trade. One would imagine that few children were present in saloons to hear the questionable music. Nevertheless, in controlling the jukeboxes, the leaders of the major recording corporations saw a way of controlling the kind of music that reached a wide audience and of curtailing the success of the small labels.

The fight against jukeboxes began in earnest in 1953, when six counties in South Carolina outlawed the machines, and continued into 1954, when police departments across America began to seize the machines and fine their owners. While economic competition motivated the larger recording companies’ support of restrictions on jukeboxes, morality stan-
standards and racism motivated community-based opposition. In Chicago, a judge ruled that organized crime controlled jukeboxes and thus that the machines were a detriment to the community.24

The major music corporations supported the regulation of jukeboxes because in economic terms the jukeboxes represented a means of distribution. The economic position of the machines was significant because, essentially, a major label is one that records, presses, and distributes its own recordings. In the 1950s, Mercury, which formed in Chicago in 1947, and Capitol Records were the only independents, or small labels, capable of this. The jukebox threatened to turn the music industry on its head because the machines could elevate the independents beyond regional producers and provide the means by which they could challenge the major corporations’ market control.25

For its part, Cash Box defended the jukeboxes by arguing that the interests of the coin-operated-machine industry and those of the record industry were tied to one another. The jukebox operators relied on the product from the record companies, and the record companies relied on the machines as a means of distribution. In 1955, there were 550,000 jukeboxes in the United States playing 25 percent of the record industry’s output. The periodical reminded the record industry that the machines represented a profound opportunity for direct marketing. Therefore, the editors of Cash Box argued, if the jukeboxes fall, so does the record industry.26

For those periodicals outside of the music industry, the popularity of Black-derived music by white performers and audiences—in this case, rock and roll—was followed with mocking disdain by the mainstream press. The focus on, and use of the term, rock and roll was an indication that the popular periodicals were changing the music terminology from “rhythm and blues” because their critique focused on white performers and the white audience. For example, Time magazine described rock and roll lyrics as “either a near-nonsense phrase or a moronic lyric in hillbilly idiom.” The magazine’s reporters likened the incomprehensible nature of the lyrics to the equally incomprehensible behavior of the teenagers at rock shows. Dismissing the lyrics as trash, Time concluded that the popularity of the music was an “epileptic kind of minstrelsy” and “an adenoidal art form.”27 The allusion to “minstrelsy” allowed Time to simultaneously degrade the abilities of the white performers, by suggesting they were mimicking Black musicians, and reiterate the fear of the power of Black culture expressed by Variety and acted upon by the southern Citizens’ Councils.
Of the non-music-industry publications, only the *New York Times Magazine* used investigative reporting techniques to answer the question: Why did many white teenagers enjoy Black-derived popular music? The teenagers explained it simply: they liked to scream. Though they often wished to scream at home or school, the rock and roll concerts were the only place they could scream. The teenagers’ public, visceral reaction to the music was shocking to observers who argued that rhythm and blues, and later rock and roll, were “attempting a total breakdown of all reticence about sex,” that rhythm and blues was “as dangerous to kids as dope,” and that the “whole world is experiencing a moral retrogression.”

The media provided opponents of rock and roll with evidence of the connection between the music and juvenile delinquency. Throughout the late 1950s, there was a rash of what the media and the court system described as “rock and roll riots.” The frequency of fights at music shows, and fear of the possibility of fights breaking out, caused several city governments to pass anti-rock and roll legislation barring the shows. In Boston, following the outbreak of violence at a show he promoted, the famed disc jockey Alan Freed was arrested and charged with anarchy. In Fayetteville and Kansas City, the police put down fights at rock and roll shows with tear gas. Generally, the violence at rock-and-roll shows was between competing groups of whites, Blacks, and Latinos, which gave further fuel to the arguments against integration.

The three-month-long *Variety* campaign against “Leer-ics,” the incidence of violence at rock shows, and the agitation of community groups caused radio stations throughout the country to create their own censoring boards. During the 1910s and 1920s in Chicago, reformists had focused on performance spaces, such as the “black and tans,” the brothels, and the dance halls. By the mid-1950s, reformists saw the music as a commodity in the form of a recording. The records frightened the reformists because they were not contained to Black neighborhoods, as the “black and tans” had been. Instead, the records were making their way to radio and jukeboxes and into the bedrooms of thousands of white teenagers, where the popularity of the records threatened to create a national “black and tan” culture. Viewing the music as something contained in the grooves of a record allowed the music’s opponents to see its growing popularity as a sudden occurrence, thereby disconnecting the music from its long history and cultural importance.
Portraying changes in music as sudden provided a platform for opponents to address the recent tumult in the music industry, which had seen conventional popular music, such as Broadway scores written by Oscar Hammerstein and sweet jazz performed by Frank Sinatra, lose its market position. Variety was among the first in the entertainment industry to attack Black music. Its editors argued that rock and roll—and its forerunner, rhythm and blues—was the lowest form of cultural expression and the product of hack writers. Variety portrayed the popularity of the music as a trend created not by market demand but rather by corrupt business practices, such as payola and the music licensing done by BMI.

ASCAP shared Variety’s perspective. Like Variety, ASCAP was a founding member of the music business. The association formed in 1914 as a protective guild that worked to ensure that songwriters and composers received royalties for their work regardless of where and in what medium the music was performed. Having formed in the days of sheet music, film, and radio, ASCAP was unprepared for the massive changes in the music industry brought on by television, jukeboxes, and the growing importance of disc jockeys.

To its detriment, ASCAP was exclusive in its membership, which included George Gershwin, Cole Porter, and Oscar Hammerstein, but did not allow rhythm and blues, country and western, or rock and roll composers to join. Coupled with its failure to anticipate or to understand the importance of disc jockeys and television, the limitations on membership provided an opening for a competing organization.

The end of ASCAP’s control of the music industry began slowly in 1941 when the organization launched an attack against NBC and CBS, and later ABC. ASCAP was demanding an increase in royalty payments. The three broadcasters retaliated by forming their own licensing organization, BMI (Broadcast Music Incorporated), which would function in the same way as ASCAP, but BMI would be under the control of broadcasters. The strike ended with a compromise. ASCAP accepted a 2.1 percent increase in royalties from live performances on radio broadcasts; BMI would collect royalties from live performances not broadcast on the radio.

For years, little changed. The major composers signed with ASCAP, and BMI had to be satisfied with the remainders: the Black, country, and Latin composers. It was disc jockeys and television that disrupted this
system, or so it appeared to ASCAP, which argued that the rise in the popularity of rhythm and blues, and later rock and roll, was due to the relationship between BMI and broadcasters. According to ASCAP, BMI was a monopoly that used payola to promote its artists. Therefore, rhythm and blues not only threatened white teenagers but was also the product of corrupt market practices.

The ire of the *Variety* editors, community groups, and city councils had created an atmosphere in which congressmen were interested in investigating the impact of the emerging popular culture trends in music, movies, and publishing on American youth. In addition, Congress was investigating corruption on the popular television quiz show, The $64,000 Question, which was so scandalous as to suggest that major corporations were engineering all popular culture trends.

Ultimately, ASCAP was unable to make its case that BMI was a monopoly because statistics showed that 85 percent of copyrighted music played on the radio, and 90 percent of copyrighted music on TV, was licensed by ASCAP. These statistics came from ASCAP’s own data. On the other hand, with respect to the relationship of disc jockeys to broadcasters, ASCAP’s charges of payola stuck.

Historically, the disc jockey represented a cultural shift in the music industry that coincided with the debate concerning the place and power of Black culture. The power of the disc jockeys seemed to originate from the fact that they made their own playlists. This encouraged recording companies to pay them off, to supply them with the newest releases, and to court them. Leonard Chess, the owner of Chicago’s Chess Records, made no secret of the fact that he bribed disc jockeys. In fact, he reported the bribes on his tax forms. He was only doing what every other company did. However, it would seem that the tastes of the disc jockeys and those of the audience must have had some role, because the Chess recordings were played despite the fact that Chess was not wealthy enough to compete with the bribes that the major corporations paid. Although they were responding to some degree to audience demand for rhythm and blues, the disc jockeys were a target of ASCAP and Congress because they were the most obvious sign of change in the music industry and attacking them was the easiest way to halt the playing of certain types of records.

Disc jockeys went relatively unchecked until 1959 when Congress, spurred by ASCAP and the corruption on The $64,000 Question, took an interest. Several disc jockeys testified at the hearings that payola was responsible for the popularity of rhythm and blues, country and western,
and rock and roll. The congressmen were satisfied to believe this despite testimony to the contrary—such as that given by *Billboard* magazine music editor Paul Ackerman, who insisted that payola payments to radio stations were standard practice as far back as the 1930s.\textsuperscript{44}

The most famous casualty of this turn of events was Alan Freed, who was fired after refusing to sign a statement saying he had never received payment for playing a record. Eventually, Freed paid a $500 fine and served six months in prison. The scandal also touched Al Benson, the leading African American broadcaster based in Chicago. Chess Records had paid Benson approximately $900 a week. It was impossible to prove that Benson had accepted payola because he distributed the money among various personal businesses.\textsuperscript{45} The payola scandal stripped the independent disc jockeys of some of their cultural power because they would never again have the trust of their audience, nor would they be allowed to program their own shows without the shadow of corruption hanging over them.

Did the curtailing of independent disc jockeys change the way music was broadcast? The answer to this lies in contrasting congressional investigators’ treatment of Alan Freed and Al Benson, who were independent disc jockeys playing rhythm and blues, and that accorded Dick Clark, a mainstream disc jockey and television host. While Benson and Freed were fined and destroyed by the congressional hearings and grand-jury investigations, Dick Clark was not. Clark may not have taken payola payments, as such, but he did own stock in the recording companies and publishing houses whose songs he played on his radio and television shows. He also owned the publishing rights for songs and was the paid representative of performers featured on his ABC television show, *American Bandstand*. His yearly salary in the 1950s was estimated at $500,000, with an additional estimated $12 million in music-company stock. At the time, it was not illegal for Clark to own stock in the companies whose songs he promoted on his television show.\textsuperscript{46}

As a result of the payola hearings and trials, the music of the major corporations remained the core of radio and television broadcasts, while the music of the independents was limited.\textsuperscript{47} The differences in the treatment of Alan Freed, Al Benson, and Dick Clark reveal the dynamic at work. Freed and Benson represented Black performers, often playing music with overtly sexual lyrics, for an integrated audience. Conversely, Dick Clark’s *American Bandstand* featured white performers, white audience members, and white dancers. Teenagers on the show followed a
strict dress code and dance rules that reduced, or eliminated, the show’s sexuality.

THE REACTION OF THE MUSIC INDUSTRY

In the national atmosphere of fear of Black culture, larger companies had a better chance of surviving because they had diverse products and groups of artists. In addition, the Variety editorials brought the fury of licensing associations and distributing companies down upon the smaller companies. ASCAP offered Variety assistance in “an endeavor to root out the evil,” and the association of songwriters placed the responsibility “at the doorstep of the recording companies and those broadcasters who encourage or condone the dissemination of the ‘leer-ics.’” In addition, the Music Operators of New York proclaimed that they would “ensure that no record is played in a coin-operated phonograph that could not properly be played in the home” and that the music industry could not “endanger the public good will . . . for the quick profit of any individual who trades on bad taste.” Moreover, distributors such as United of Houston “started a thorough screening process of all records, especially r&b discs, and refused to sell any that were offensive or suggestive.” Eventually, BMI responded to the call for censorship by distributing a list of “play with caution” songs to BMI affiliates.48

The major labels responded in a similar manner. In the spring of 1955, Columbia Records launched a new advertising slogan for its catalogue of popular music: “Rhythm without the Blues.”49 This slogan brilliantly summarized the major label’s stance. The label was willing to record Black-derived music but stripped away the African American artists and their music traditions from the popular hits.

At first, in the late 1940s, the major corporations had been able to ignore the success of the independent labels and Black music. By the start of the 1950s, however, it was clear to everyone involved that Black music was profitable. “Covering” refers to recordings made by competing music labels. “Covers” were replicas of the original recording featuring a different artist.50 Labels, such as RCA Victor and Columbia Records, closely watched the independent labels for “potential hits” to cover. The larger labels had the star power, advertising budgets, and distribution networks to force radio and television networks to play their version of a song.51 However, profits from “covers” were negligible because a portion of the
song’s royalties went to the songwriters who worked for the independent labels.

When “covering” failed to bring in large profits or destroy the independents, the major corporations encouraged radio stations to have smaller play lists limited to forty songs recorded by the major companies. Previously, the playlists were huge and created by the disc jockeys. The smaller playlists were advantageous for the major labels because they had relationships with the advertisers and radio stations that the independent labels lacked. Major corporations, using the top-forty playlists, were able to squeeze out competition, remake their production around a limited product, and minimize the risks by limiting new styles of music. The top-forty system did increase payola payments to disc jockeys by independent labels desperate to have their records played. Major labels made payola payments but were not dependent upon them, as the independents were, because they had advertising budgets. After 1959’s congressional payola hearings, the independents had a far tougher time convincing stations to play their records.

When the independents started to emerge in the 1940s, they used antiquated methods, in terms of machinery and materials, for recording, and had outside firms press the records for them. They relied on acetate masters and shellac 78-rpm records in an era when the major labels were switching to magnetic tape for masters and vinyl for the records, and were then were developing long playing records for classical music and 45-rpm records for rock and roll. By the mid-1950s, the 78-rpm record was the standard for the jukeboxes, which gave many independents access to the jukebox market. The major corporations began to send the smaller, lighter, and more resilient 45-rpm records to radio stations in 1954 and jukeboxes slowly began to adopt them. Eventually, by the end of the 1950s, the industry standard would be 33 1/3-rpm records, but many of the independents were still recording the majority of their catalogues in the 78-rpm shellac format because they lacked the capital to upgrade their equipment. In addition, Billboard discontinued its charts monitoring jukebox play and sheet-music sales and stopped keeping separate charts for music sales and radio play. Instead, the magazine began publishing a combined chart, representing radio and sales, the “Hot 100” chart, after 1957. The new chart system made sales and radio broadcasts indistinguishable from one another. The jukeboxes, whose charts motivated radio stations to play certain songs because station owners believed this would help them capture the youth market, were rendered virtually inconsequential in
shaping radio play from that point on. The independents that survived the recording format and chart format shift were those, such as Chicago’s Chess, that were able to press records in all the formats, ensuring that they could reach any audience member regardless of equipment.  

Black radio programming seemed to mirror the rise and decline of the power of the independents. In 1955, when Muddy Waters was touring with Alan Freed’s show, there were radio stations in thirty-nine states that reported broadcasting “Negro programming,” which included news, sports, soap operas, public-service programs, and all forms of music. In 1956, when Nat “King” Cole was attacked in Birmingham, there were radio stations in forty-two states reporting “Negro programming.” As the recording medium shifted to 45s and then 33 1/3, as top-forty formats took over, and as the Citizens’ Councils’ anger over the popularity of Black music increased, the number of states reporting “Negro programming” fell to thirty-eight in 1957. By 1960, only twenty-five states had stations broadcasting “Negro programming.” In 1965, when there were approximately 19 million African Americans with an estimated buying power of $22 billion annually, there were only twenty-eight states where radio broadcast Black content.

The optimistic view of the changes in the number of stations broadcasting “Negro programming” might be that, because of the popularity of Black music and Black-derived music among white teenagers by the end of the 1950s, it was becoming impossible to discern the difference between “Negro programming” and the rest of the programming. In reality, at least in the reality created by broadcasters and advertisers, the Black audience and the white audience were two distinct groups. The Chicago Defender observed that broadcasters were trying to create a “separate but equal” industry in which the Black audience was understood to be working low-level jobs and devoid of diverse tastes in programming. The result of the limited play of Black programming by broadcasters meant that the diversity in Black music—for example, the Black classical tradition or the Black country-and-western tradition—were not part of the broadcast day. In addition, radio stations required that music producers force Black musicians to change the political messages in their songs. In the 1920s and 1930s, Black musicians lamented having limited access to recording and broadcasting. By the end of the 1950s, in those twenty-five states that played Black music, the musicians could reach a larger audience, but their popularity also introduced a new kind of cultural constraint.
THE IMPACT ON MUSICIANS

Citizens’ Councils and the music industry’s attempts to control the spread and content of Black music had an enormous impact on musicians touring the South. Bandleader Buddy Holly, a native of Texas, was once asked how he could stand traveling and performing with Black musicians in the Alan Freed tours. Holly’s response typified what the segregationists feared: “Oh we’re Negroes too. We get to feeling that’s what we are.” Carl Perkins, the Tennessee-born guitarist, explained that the white musicians performing Black music had to contend with southern preachers who believed that the musicians were “defiling the minds of our beautiful teenagers.” In the minds of white supremacists, these performers were race traitors who, along with the Black musicians, were the “shock troops of mongrelization.” Perkins, for one, was aware of this danger. In the mid-1950s, he toured with Chuck Berry, the Coasters, the Drifters, Frankie Lymon, and Little Richard, among others. “I really was nervous about it,” Perkins recalled, “I told my brother, ‘We could get killed. . . . We’re gonna be the next Nat “King” Cole. Somebody’s gonna get us.’”

The fear of “being the next Nat ‘King’ Cole” extended to Black musicians as well. For the touring musicians, harassment was a daily occurrence. The treatment of Black musicians in the South forced many musicians to refuse to tour the region. Nat “King” Cole summed up their experience by saying that the musicians, regardless of their fame and wealth, were forced to live as second-class citizens when on tour in the South. Muddy Waters and his band routinely had to go around to the back door of restaurants to buy food, and at gas stations they faced the threat of violence from groups of white men. Louis Jordan, who recorded in Chicago for Decca Records, and his band added to the list of daily abuses by explaining that they had to pay higher prices than whites for food and lodging. Mississippi-born and Chicago-raised, Sam Cooke and his band were once arrested in a whites-only park in Memphis. The arresting officers told them, “You are not in Chicago. We will hang you down here and they’ll never find your body.” Needless to say, touring the South reinforced for many Black performers why they liked Chicago. Despite belonging to a segregated union, and though housing and employment were limited in Chicago, they did not have to regularly fear interactions at gas stations, parks, and restaurants. Integrated shows were rare. Black
musicians performed mostly in bars that white teenagers could not enter. When integrated shows, which occurred because the white audience could travel the city freely even if the Black musicians could not play freely due to union rules, did occur in Chicago in the 1950s, there were no riots or belligerent public outrage.\footnote{64}

The danger for the musicians increased when they performed for white or integrated audiences in the South. One persistent danger was the attention of white women. Having been born in the South, the musicians knew the danger of looking at white women. After the shows, white teenage girls swarmed the stage doors. This filled many Black performers with fear. Blues howler Wynonie Harris, who recorded for King Records in Cincinnati, recalled hiding in men’s washrooms following shows to avoid white female fans.\footnote{65}

The threat of violence extended to broadcast venues that dared to feature Black artists. For instance, an Alabama television station planning to broadcast a live performance by singer Harry Belafonte was knocked off the air when a vigilante pulled down the cables at the transmitting tower. The vandalism occurred minutes prior to the broadcast. No one saw the performance.\footnote{66}

In addition to the hate groups and vandals, the police also targeted Black musicians. In Baton Rouge, rock and roll star Little Richard was arrested for “improper posturing.” At the show, 400 teenagers were arrested under the same charge. All Little Richard, his band, and the audience had done was take part in a semi-integrated show.\footnote{67} Dizzy Gillespie, Ella Fitzgerald, and her orchestra were all arrested in Houston. Empowered by the ban on offensive music, the police raided the club under the auspices of the city’s blue laws. Finding no drugs or other illegal items, the police charged the jazz musicians with gambling (they were playing cards backstage before a performance).\footnote{68} These examples of arrests and harassment of Black musicians demonstrate that the targets of white supremacists were not genre specific. White supremacists saw all Black musicians who performed for white or integrated audiences as a threat to segregation.

For Black musicians in the 1950s, Chuck Berry became the chilling example of what could happen to a performer in the hands of the authorities. By 1958, Berry, who recorded for Chicago’s Chess label, had eight songs on the top-100 pop charts and four best-selling rhythm and blues recordings. In addition, he opened an integrated nightclub in a white neigh-
borhood in St. Louis—Club Bandstand. A year later, Berry was arrested for violating the Mann Act—a 1920s federal law prohibiting the transportation of women across state lines with a sexual intent.\(^69\)

The female in question was Janice Escalante—a fourteen-year-old with two prior convictions for prostitution. Escalante was a mixed-race woman Berry met while on tour in Mexico and the American Southwest. Escalante had joined Berry on tour and worked as a hat-check girl in Berry’s club in St. Louis. When she was not on duty in Club Bandstand, she worked as a prostitute. When she was arrested for solicitation, she told the police how she had come to live in St. Louis.\(^70\)

To the St. Louis authorities, Escalante presented an opportunity to destroy Berry, who had publicly violated numerous rules of segregation: he had frequent and well-known relationships with non-Black women, played before integrated audiences, and owned an integrated club. Not only was Escalante underage, but she had traveled with Berry across state lines and engaged in an intimate relationship with Berry. Escalante and Berry’s relationship was a textbook Mann Act violation.

The Mann Act did not require that the parties involved have sex. All that was needed was proof of the intent. In addition, though conceived as an anti-white-slavery law, the Mann Act did not contain language that specifically made it illegal for Black men to transport non-Black women. However, throughout the history of the law, the Mann Act was used to punish Black men for engaging in consensual relationships with non-Black women. This was the case with Chuck Berry.\(^71\)

There were multiple Chuck Berry trials. The first resulted in a guilty verdict, which was overturned in an appeals court that ruled the judge had “intended to disparage the defendant by repeated questions about race.” In addition to asking constant questions concerning race, the judge only referred to Berry as “the Negro.” The second trial began following a 1959 incident, in Mississippi, when Berry asked a white girl out on a date after one of his shows. He was arrested and served a brief jail sentence in Mississippi. The press coverage of this event gave federal authorities in St. Louis the motivation to retry Berry under the Mann Act.\(^72\)

One outgrowth of the trials was that the southern press depicted Berry as a danger to social mores regarding race and sexual relations. To prove its case, the southern press published the trial testimony next to lyrics to Berry’s hit song “Sweet Little Sixteen” (originally released in 1958), which described a white teenage girl who wore a clingy dress, high heels, and too much makeup so that she could sneak into shows and dance with all the men. “Oh, but tomorrow morning,” he sang, she would “change
her trend” and leave the grown-up world behind as she returned to school. In the hands of his enemies, this song was not about a musician observing the change in audience but an indictment.73

Berry’s second trial was lengthy. It ended with him being convicted and sentenced to three years in prison and a $10,000 fine. The series of trials devastated his career. All of his songs written after the arrests and trials failed to sell. Chess was able to make some money from rereleases of Berry’s 1950s hits, all of which were covered by white British rock and roll bands like the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and the Animals.74

Berry’s story illustrates that in trying to answer Nathaniel Dett’s call to emancipate Black music from the racist white imagination, Black musicians had disrupted the order of things. Rather than finding freedom from segregation, the growth in the popularity of their music transported the Black musicians into a world where the beating of Nat “King” Cole made real their worst fears regarding racial violence and oppression. Though Cole argued that there had been progress in race relations, many musicians, both Black and white, saw the attack as proof that little had changed.

The danger that the musicians faced continued into the 1960s. For example, Sam Cooke had difficulty booking hotel rooms throughout the South in the early 1960s. In 1963, in Shreveport, Cooke was refused service at the city’s Holiday Inn. Cooke argued with the proprietors. The dispute became heated and his band had to convince him to leave the hotel lobby out of fear that Cooke would get himself killed. After Cooke left the hotel, he drove through the city, in his Maserati, hand on the car’s horn. The police arrested him for disturbing the peace. He bailed himself out in time to perform that night. A few weeks after the incident, Cooke wrote the civil-rights anthem “A Change is Gonna Come.”75

The song began with the line, “I was born by a river in a little tent.” With the image of the river, Cooke was calling on the countless metaphors of restlessness and migration that filled gospel and blues lyrics, and echoed through the works of poet Langston Hughes. The imagery of the lyric also called into play the theme of being a “motherless child,” a key metaphor in the Black music tradition for understanding the African American experience. Cooke captured the pain of being rootless, something a Black musician understood all too well, by writing, “Oh And just like the river / I’ve been running ever since.”

Fueled by his experiences touring the South and the conversations he had with students who participated in sit-in protests, Cooke used the song to capture the desperation of someone suffering racial oppression
by writing, “It’s been too hard living but I’m afraid to die.” The next line suggests that the racial oppression was causing the former gospel singer a degree of religious crisis, “‘Cause I don’t know what’s up there beyond the sky.” He challenged the tradition of white-only spaces in the lines, “I go to the movies and I go downtown/ Somebody keep telling me, ‘Don’t hang around.’” “Then I go to my brother,” he wrote, “And I say, ‘Brother, help me please,’/ But he winds up knocking me down on my knees.” In the last stanza, Cooke turned the song toward the hope that Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of by writing, “Oh there been times that I thought I couldn’t last for long / But now I think I’m able to carry on/ It’s been a long, a long time coming / But I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will.”

Cooke was right: there were changes at hand. The growth in their popularity and their cultural power were indications of how much Black musicians, and their position in society, had changed. In previous decades, when threatened with racial violence, many would have run away. The musicians in the 1950s and early 1960s had started standing their ground and discovered that by doing so they could weaken segregation and disrupt the music industry’s race-based economics.

Sam Cooke, Nat “King” Cole, Chuck Berry, Muddy Waters, Wynonie Harris, and the other performers touring the South and changing radio had something in common: they were all headliners. They were famous. Their fight against segregation took place outside of the Black community and gained part of its power from changing the perception of race among white youth. For those musicians who were not famous—the working musicians, the guys in the band—the fight against segregation assumed a different form. For them, the discussion of segregation took place not in teenagers’ bedrooms or in integrated clubs, but in the American Federation of Musicians’ union halls and within the Black public sphere in Chicago.