Unpopular Culture

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On 4 August 2012, Wade Michael Page went on a rampage at a Sikh temple outside of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, killing six people and wounding four others before taking his own life. Although his precise motivation remains unclear, his racist beliefs clearly played a leading role. For more than a decade, Page had embraced core elements of white supremacy. He was also an active, even visible, member of the white power music scene. In 2005, he founded the group End Apathy. Fed up with what he saw as social pathologies, he hoped the band would encourage whites to better see the world around them and act to make it a better place. Importantly, Page put race at the center of his vision, using the divisive discourse of white power to identify both problems and solutions. As his description of the band highlights:

End Apathy began in 2005 [...] to figure out what it would take to actually accomplish positive results in society and what is holding us back. A lot of what I realized at the time was that if we could figure out how to end peoples apathetic ways it would be the start towards moving forward.[...] But I didn't want to just point the finger at what other people should do, but also I was willing to point out some of my faults on how I was holding myself back. And that is how I wrote the song ‘Self Destruct’. (Blood)

On the group’s MySpace page, moreover, Page contrasted its music with pop: ‘The music is a sad commentary on our sick society and the problems that prevent true progress’. He concludes that whites are blind and asleep, an assessment that reflects a deeper white nationalist belief that whites are ‘zombies’ who need to wake up to their perilous situation. Clearly, Page hoped his music would be a catalyst for this racist revolution.

Few would classify End Apathy as popular music. The band had a limited audience, meager sales, and no name recognition. Moreover, the group openly expressed sentiments many would deem racist, hateful, and dehumanizing. Indeed, were it not for his act of violence, few would have ever heard of the band, which was destined to be bad music—offensive, transgressive, and of questionable quality.
White power music remains wildly unpopular. In fact, it is hard to imagine a more maligned and marginalized form of expressive culture, whether measured by market share, public outrage and condemnation, or reaction from other musicians, as evidenced by songs like ‘Nazi Punks Fuck Off’ by the Dead Kennedys. It would be tempting to dismiss white power music as simply bad music: in poor taste and of questionable quality, it breaks with social convention as its overt racism, advocacy of violence, and palpable rage transgress accepted limits of speech and sentiment. Yet, if this is all we hear in white power music, we are not listening closely enough to it. This paper seeks to offer a more complex interpretation that complicates prevailing accounts of white power, musical expression, and popular culture. To this end, drawing on examples primarily from the U.S., this paper advances three arguments.

First, white power music is unpopular, but it is not isolated or idiosyncratic. Rather, it actively engages with and appropriates musical styles to communicate its message, build audience, create community, recruit members, and to crossover to more mainstream spaces. Second, the unpopularity of white power music has crystallized across the past century. Where white supremacist music, like white racism generally, pervaded popular culture and public life, it now largely dwells on the margins, emergent in oppositional subcultures. Finally, for all of its engagements with the popular, white power music remains unpopular. It is perhaps best described as unpopular culture; that is, a set of cultural practices and cultural productions that draw upon and deploy popular stylings but have little claim beyond a bounded social field on audience, desire, or fashion.

Despite its unpopularity, the power of white power rock is evident not just in its resonance with the movement but the ways that its aesthetics and styles mesh with a white supremacist narrative. I build my argument upon the idea that ‘racist music’ becomes a space for community, for disseminating the grammar, tropes, and narratives of white supremacy, and for cultivating a white nationalist worldview. Hate music is not innocuous but part and parcel of the development of the white nationalist movement. The Southern Poverty Law Center highlights this power:

Since the early 1990s, various forms of ‘white power’ music have grown from a cottage industry serving a few racist skinheads to a multimillion-dollar, worldwide industry that is a primary conduit of money and young recruits to the radical right. Although the music originated in Britain in the early 1980s, it is now popular among hard-core racists throughout Europe and the United States.
With this in mind, I begin my discussion with a survey of white power music. Against this background, I endeavor to complicate white power music, contrasting songs from the first decades of the twentieth century with more recent works. This comparative analysis allows a rereading of popular music as ‘race music’ that lays seeds for more radical harvests. Next, I shift my focus to the use of the sounds and stylings of popular music to reach new audiences, first in the recruitment of new members to the movement and second in an unorthodox effort to create a crossover band, a group that would remain faithful to white power ideals and ideologies and appeal to a wider audience. In closing, I reflect on the scope and significance of unpopular culture.

‘Race Music’

In 1955, Asa Carter lost his job at WILD radio station in Birmingham, Alabama, bringing to an end his regionally syndicated program, which was sponsored by the American States Rights Association. His firing would also mark the end of his radio career. Rather than rethink his racist and anti-Semitic views, Carter redoubled his commitments to segregation and white supremacy. He publicly broke with longtime ally the Alabama Citizens’ Council, organizing the North Alabama Citizens’ Council as a visible alternative. The leadership role arguably gave Carter an advantaged position to defend Jim Crow and commandeer media attention. Almost immediately, he directed attention at the evils of popular culture. Of particular concern for Carter and his followers was the rising popularity of rock ‘n’ roll, which many at the time dubbed ‘race music’. The former radio personality advocated a ban of the musical style, believing its content encouraged moral degradation and race mixing. The music itself and the behaviors said to be promoted by it were perceived to be a grave threat to white culture (cf. Martin and Segrave). Indeed, Carter saw in rock ‘n’ roll a conspiracy by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, ‘a plot to mongrelize America’. As such, ‘the obscenity and vulgarity’, he and others found in the increasing popular genre led them to assert that ‘rock n roll music is obviously a means by which the white man and his children can be driven to the level of the negro’ (qtd. in Garofalo 145). To combat the animalism evoked by the banality of rock music, he laid out a plan to work with the owners of juke boxes to remove ‘race music’ records.

As outrageous as his reading of pop music seems today, Carter was not an isolated voice. His protest escalated locally and echoed nationally. Perhaps
dissatisfied with the theatrics of public relations, Carter formed a second group in 1956, the Ku Klux Klan of the Confederacy (KKKC), which turned to direct action and violence. They disrupted a Nat King Cole concert, attacking the singer on stage, and ‘picketed a concert featuring the Platters, LaVern Baker, Bo Diddley, and Bill Haley, with signs reading, “NAACP says integration, rock & roll, rock & roll”, “Jungle Music promotes integration”, and “Jungle music aids delinquency”’ (Delmont 138). Later, members of the KKKC would abduct, castrate, torture, and leave for dead an African American painter.

Racist opposition to rock music manifested itself throughout the country. City councils in Alabama, Arkansas, California, Louisiana, Texas, and Virginia prohibited interracial dances and concerts. Meanwhile, radios from Pittsburgh and Cincinnati to Chicago and Denver ‘refused to play rock and roll’ (cf. Delmont). And, perhaps mirroring efforts organized by Carter, protestors in Inglewood, California circulated fliers that depicted the perceived evils of rock music. They featured ‘pictures of young black men and white women dancing, with captions reading, “Boy meets girl… be-bop style”, and “Total Mongrelization”’ (Delmont 138).

Carter eventually turned away from the KKKC, apparently after a falling out over finances in which he shot two associates, and his crusade against pop music, but remained active in (racial) politics. He worked as a speech writer for Governor George Wallace, helping to pen the iconic phrase, ‘Segregation Today, Segregation Tomorrow, Segregation Forever’. Later, he reinvented himself and became wildly popular, authoring the novel that served as the basis for The Outlaw Josey Wales and under an assumed name an equally fictional tale that purported to be the autobiography of Cherokee Indian, The Education of Little Tree, which for a time was selected as an official choice of Oprah’s Book Club.

Carter did not stop rock music any more than local ordinances extending Jim Crow did throughout the body politic. Ironically, much of today’s music that comprises the white power scene derives from early forms of rock ‘n’ roll. While this might horrify the former Klansman, demagogue, and crusader, one imagines that he would applaud the creative energies and racist ideologies central to it. Much like his early career in radio, in which he used a popular medium for increasingly unpopular ends, today musicians, producers, and leaders use popular musical forms to recruit new members, generate revenue, stabilize white nationalist identities and ideologies, and create community. And like Carter, this music scene is vocal and theatrical, wildly unpopular, and primed for volatility and violence.
Recentering White Power

In a recent interview, sociologist Peter Simi, co-author of *American Swastika*, identified music as the cornerstone of contemporary white power:

Music is central to the movement in a lot of ways. It played a vital role in terms of offering opportunities for potential recruitment, offering opportunities for the generation of revenue and then probably most importantly, you know, music pulls people together. It gives them opportunities to get together for music shows, music festivals; small shows, large ones, coming together on the Internet and talking about music shows.

All of these are opportunities for them to share in these kinds of occasions where they’re talking, you know, spending time with, communicating with like-minded others who share the same view of the world as they do and talking about, you know, the future and what needs to be done.

As Simi suggests, the white power music scene matters in ways often unrecognized and unexpected from scholars and non-scholars alike. Like all subcultures rooted in expression, style, and performance, it has always been about more than entertainment, parties, fun, and ‘distractions’. For a movement pushed to the margins, it advances the movement organizationally, facilitates the circulation of ideological positions, anchors interactive spaces (both in person and online), and establishes a forum for the elaboration of meaningful identities.¹

White power music covers a diverse range of musical styles. In addition to folk and country, it includes musicians producing hard rock, punk, Oi, hardcore, and metal, notably National Socialist black metal. Its global audience produces and consumes it within local and regional subcultures. Although most visible in North America and Western Europe, it plays an increasingly important role in cultural politics within Eastern Europe, South America, and Australia. Producers of white power music have adopted emerging media with swiftness and relative ease, first embracing CDs over albums and cassette tapes and more recently moving onto the Internet both to facilitate distribution and seize upon the marketing possibilities of new media, tapping the potential of social media to connect with audiences and increase access to music through streaming audio and internet radio. Not infrequently, labels have ties to established or emerging white nationalist organizations.
Resistance Records offers a great illustration of the scene and its organizational structures and ideological elements. Indeed, as an emblematic label, it has proven to be a vital institution not only within white power music but also for the movement as a whole. Established in Windsor, Ontario in 1993, according the Anti-Defamation League, it operated as a ‘one-man hate-music distribution operation with a handful of album titles’, but rather rapidly expanded to become the leading hate rock distributor in the US. Legal problems crippled the label, leading to its eventual sale to Willis A. Carto, founder of the Liberty Lobby, and Todd Blodgett, who relocated it to the US and worked to resuscitate it. A year later, the pair sold it to William Pierce, author of *The Turner Diaries* and founder of the National Alliance. Like Carto and Blodgett, Pierce believed Resistance Records had the potential to recruit young people to the movement and more easily and broadly communicate its message. As such, the new ownership expanded the label beyond its historic distribution hub, adding a monthly magazine and establishing a web presence notable for its scope. While the label has suffered as lawsuits, Pierce’s death, and factionalism devastated the National Alliance, it remains a major example of the promise of and problems posed by white power music. Labels like Resistance Records are not the only space of dissemination for hate music cultivation. Concerts and music festivals play a pivotal role in the scene, creating what Simi and Futrell dub ‘free spaces’ that allow participants to express themselves without reservation, validating identities and ideologies. Music matters to white power because of the ways in which it advances the movement, communicates its ideological messages, and opens spaces for the creation of social networks and identities.

# Race, Resentment, and Rage

White power music has no singular origin. It has multiple roots and takes seemingly endless routes in and out of popular culture. It appears in blackface on the minstrelsy stage, later in the patriotic songs of the Ku Klux Klan (cf. Crews), and then in the guise of country and rockabilly (cf. Messner et al.; Wade). Most famously, it has favored the oppositional worlds of alternative rock—oi, punk, hardcore, and metal (cf. Duncombe and Tremblay; Dyck; Hochhauser). It exemplifies the transnational dialogues stitching together white power worldwide and the increasingly translocal articulation of whiteness that anchors white nationalism. Perhaps ironically, it takes shape in subcultures marked by resistance and known for anti-establishment, progressive, and even anti-racist sentiments (cf. Duncombe and Tremblay; Home; Sabin).
Contemporary histories of hate rock almost invariably center their accounts around the British band Skrewdriver and its charismatic lead singer Ian Stuart, highlighting the ways in which the band blended class politics, white victimization, British nationalism, and strident racism into a volatile cocktail that drew on the resentment and rage of punk music and the utopian underground of the skinhead subculture. In a very real way, Skrewdriver racialized Oi music and punk more generally, offering a template of how to repurpose pop stylings and the sentiments of youth subculture. It opened a dialogue first within the UK and then across the Atlantic and into Europe around how music as a cultural technology might be deployed to direct political energies (cf. Brown; Ridgeway), establishing close ties with the National Front and encouraging violence sonically, and also secure niche markets through ideology, founding the record label Blood and Honour. These precedents of invention of genre, exploitation of medium, and ideological opportunism reappear in successive subcultures across national borders: hardcore in the United States, black metal in Europe, and folk in the UK (cf. Spracklen).

Less important than the actual chronology of white power music are the conditions that make it possible for hate rock to take shape and persistently shift in novel contexts. I have in mind what Dunscombe and Tremblay refer to as the ‘tipping point’, which transforms ‘inchoate, oppositional rage’ into a potent, mobilizable force that targets abject others: where punks had once ‘allowed their rage against the status quo to slip between those in power and those without it, the White Power punk tips primarily into a hatred of the powerless’ (114). White power music becomes a vector for white resentments associated with globalization, decolonization, deindustrialization, and post-Fordism; a small, marginal, expression of a larger backlash against immigration, multiculturalism, and civil rights. Importantly, according to Dunscombe and Tremblay,

White Power punk’s sense of victimization, its valorization of oppositional solidarity, its creation and mobilization of DIY cultural networks, its understanding of the desire of the forbidden and the shocking, and the simple raw emotionality and anger of its expression are characteristics that all punk shares. (115)

These elements were the building blocks for more expansive and penetrating dialogues, enabling hate rock to crystallize, gain traction, and eventually become the cornerstone of the movement and the key ideological conduit for it.
Listening to Hate Rock

Hate rock addresses the preoccupations and expresses the presumptions of advocates of white power. As such, band names and song lyrics clearly illustrate the findings of scholars concerned with the movement more generally. Grounded in concrete notions of naturalized racial and gender differences, they represent a world of constant struggle, especially an ongoing or impending race war; they celebrate pride, honor, and loyalty; they give voice to a hypermasculine and heteronormative worldview; they picture whites (as a people, race, nation, and/or culture) as imperiled; they present dehumanizing portraits of racial others, especially Jews and African Americans; and they offer critiques of the state of society and the relationship to the nation state. The most extreme lyrical themes cluster around racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia. For instance, songs like ‘Splatterday, Nigger Day’ by Grinded Nig, which depicts an attack on an African American, and ‘Repatriation’ by Final War, which launches an invective against immigrants, clearly illustrate the extremes of white power music (cf. Dyck). And Midtown Bootboys call for anti-gay violence:

Stop the threat of AIDS today
Cripple, maim or kill a gay
We’ve got to take a stand today
We’ve got to wage a war on gays
(qtd. in Burghart 1)

Advocacy of violence has led some critics to describe white power music as terrorism, a point substantiated by Aaronson who asserts that between 1987 and 2003, ‘members of the white power music scene have been linked to 56 murders as well as thousands of acts of vandalism, assault’, and other crimes (cf. Aaronson).

Less extreme, though not innocuous, tropes include songs that wax nostalgic about Nazi Germany and Viking society, linking past to present, while laying claims to a virile and romantic versions of a supreme white masculinity. An overlapping theme hails specific heroic figures, often celebrating their sacrifices to the movement and/or race. Other songs extol the virtues of contemporary white nationalism, especially embodied by skinheads, as a way of life. In such music, '[t]here is also a clear emphasis on upholding Aryan values through movement participation, fraternity, kinship ties, and racial loyalty. These lyrics speak of fostering “global brotherhood”, “volk”, “white pride”, and “Aryan heritage”’ (Futrell et al. 281). In sum, what
is important to note here is that white power music creates an abject, even monstrous, other and an empowered and enlightened self, reiterating some of the most vile and violent imagery directed at people of color, Jews, and gays and lesbians, and some of the most romanticized assessments of white (supremacist) agents.

**The White Power Music Scene**

The social structures and cultural meanings associated with white power music have spawned subcultures around the globe and facilitated the construction of identities. It not only creates an interactive context for the presentation and articulation of self, but it also provides a set of frames and codes through which individuals can fashion themselves. Music matters to white nationalists not simply for its rhythm or sound, not only because it gives voice to visions and values, but importantly because it provides a material expression to white power. It anchors a scene, opens up space, encourages interaction, fosters the articulation of identity, and creates community. While critics have rightly highlighted the lyrics of hate rock and often linked them to violence, such assessments threaten to offer merely a caricature of the scene, its attractions, and its significance. For clearly, what white power music means for its producers and audiences is multifaceted: part ideological, part interactional, part identification. While white supremacist music now might be best described as marginal, if not deviant, manifesting many of the features of other oppositional musical subcultures, often interfacing, if not overlapping with them, its present formation differs markedly from its antecedents in tone, content, and reception.

**Songs for Mary Phagan**

Music extolling white supremacy, advocating hatred towards blacks, Jews, and immigrants, and promoting the defense of the white race (often from a perceived existential threat) is nothing new. In fact, this might describe much of American popular music up into the twentieth century. On the one hand, the minstrelsy tradition, in which actors staged performances in blackface, borrowed and denigrated expressive elements of the African diaspora, used caricature blackness to make commentaries on racial and class politics, and delighted audiences of white men with their song stylings, arguably constitutes a core strand of American popular culture. On the
other hand, as urbanization, industrialization, and immigration changed the face of America, scholars set about collecting endangered musical traditions, seeking pure, uncorrupted, and authentic expressions that required disentangling white from black stylings (cf. Taylor and Baker 2007). This racialized and essentialized splitting would have profound implications for the development of popular music as well as understandings of racial difference that echo down through Asa Carter and hate rock.

A measure of the centrality of white supremacy to popular music in the early twentieth century can be found in Ku Klux Klan (KKK) sheet music. While the KKK has the rightful reputation of being a violent vigilante group that used terror to police racial boundaries and put African Americans in their ascribed social place, the group remade itself in 1915 as a fraternal organization that was at least to the outside committed entirely to 100% Americanism. In the following decade, the KKK skyrocketed to prominence across the US, promoting family values, patriotism, and tradition, while campaigning against modernity, immigration, and progressivism. Public pageantry, from parades to socials, and ritualized secrecy were fundamental to the success of the reborn KKK, particularly its political influence in local and regional elections and the passage of immigration reform at the national level. Not surprisingly music played a key role, communicating values and principles, creating community, and crafting identities of white Americans. In the songs collected by Crews one sees a celebration of America, Christianity (or rather Protestantism), whiteness and, to a lesser extent, denigration of Jews, immigrants, Catholics, and African Americans (cf. Crews). As the reformed KKK collapsed under the weight of corruption and disillusionment, most Americans forgot its 100% Americanism and the music that accompanied it—so much so that a recent episode of History Detectives on PBS featured a segment sleuthing the origins of a KKK recording discovered by a surprised and disgusted antique collector at a yard sale.

After the Second World War, two fundamental shifts reinforced one another: first, American society began a slow and incomplete journey toward racial equality, which contrary to public opinion was neither as successful nor as complete as notions of a post-racial America would imply (cf. Dowd-Hall), and second, consumerism and media culture began to reshape selves and society. Asa Carter’s campaign discussed at the outset of this chapter represented a backlash against these twin forces. In keeping with these deeper shifts in racial thinking and cultural production, the terrain of the popular shifted as well, destabilizing the acceptability and in many cases the utterability of overtly racist music. In essence, white power music has become unpopular and yet has remained a vital means through
which advocates have sought to become popular, to expand the base of the movement and the purchase of their ideological claims.

Two songs clarify these broader shifts in white power and popular culture, offering keen insight into the scene and its strategies. Both songs about Mary Phagan, a young factory worker killed under mysterious circumstances in the Atlanta area in 1913. The subsequent investigation led to Jewish factory manager Leo Frank being charged with the murder. Labeled the American Dreyfus, an obvious reference to the fraudulent, anti-Semitic trial of a French officer at the end of the nineteenth century, Frank was convicted and initially sentenced to death, which was later commuted by Governor John M. Slaton. Outraged, a group of local citizens, including many community leaders, formed the Knights of Mary Phagan (KMP) to avenge the girl and defend the race. As one speaker said to assembled members of the group:

This sainted girl [...] who, true to her inherent high breeding and the teachings of her devoted mother, gave up her own life rather than surrender that Christian attribute—the crown, glory, and honor of true womanhood into the threshold of which she was just entering. (qtd. in Dinnerstein 136)

Shortly thereafter, members of the KMP kidnapped Frank from prison and lynched him. None of the participants were ever convicted for their roles in the ritual killing. Frank was pardoned posthumously in 1986. Importantly, the Knights of Mary Phagan would be central to the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan, comprising its core membership at its public unveiling in 1915 (cf. Dinnerstein).

A folk ballad, ‘Little Mary Phagan’, began circulating after the trial. It was played at rallies calling for the execution of Frank. Largely a narrative of key events, it paints the young woman as an innocent and virtuous victim, while casting the accused killer as cold, calculating, and alien, an individual who defiled both a young woman and the traditions of region since he took advantage of her vulnerability and did so on Confederate Memorial Day.

Leo Frank he met her
With a brutish heart, we know;
He smiled, and said, ‘Little Mary,
You won’t go home no more’.
Sneaked along behind her
Till she reached the metal-room;
He laughed, and said, ‘Little Mary,
You have met your fatal doom’.
(Snyder)

While the ballad paints a morality tale, pivoting on familiar themes of good and evil amplified by references to the inhumanity and marginality of the perpetrator, it does not invoke overt anti-Semitic slurs or celebrate the impending violence of retribution. It does not have to. The audience knows that the ballad is as much a racial drama as it is a morality play because media coverage and popular sentiment have already framed it as a young, virginal and honorable woman mercilessly murder by a racial other and outsider—a Jew, an industrialist, a transplanted Yankee (though born in San Antonio, Texas). It was one more text in a broader dialogue about racial justice and social order in which the execution of the former would ensure a return to the latter.

Seventy-five years later, the white power band Achtung Juden would release *Reich Songs, Volume Two*, which featured a photo of the lynching as its cover. The CD, featuring 14 tracks, opens with ‘The Knights of Mary Phagan’, and also includes original songs like ‘Keep on Fighting’, ‘Burn the Books’, and ‘Our Pride is our Loyalty’ and covers of ‘classic’ songs by Skrewdriver, ‘Hail the New Dawn’, and No Remorse’s ‘Son of Odin’. The song is a simple, fast-paced, and hard-driving rock anthem marked by forceful guitars and drums and guttural vocals. Key passages follow.

Fetch the Rope
String up the Jew
Punish the Abraham
Leo Frank at the End of a Noose

...........
We are the Knights of Mary Phagan
We are the Knights of Mary Phagan

...........
Kill the pedophile
Reclaim our nation

...........
Destroy ZOG, before they destroy you

...........
We are the Knights of Mary Phagan
We are the Knights of Mary Phagan
Where the ballad reported a current event, here, the author and listener becomes one of the Knights, empathizing with, endorsing, and enacting the lynching. Violent in imagery and sound, the song celebrates the killing, legitimating the deed through anti-Semitic language and assumptions, which were absent from the ballad. This should not be too surprising given that the name of the band itself translates from German as Attention Jews and makes a fairly explicit reference to Nazism, a reference reinforced by the CD title (*Reich Songs, Volume Two*). To make Frank and the impropriety of his actions stark to contemporary listeners, the band foregrounds the killing and the pathological character of the killer. And more, it reminds listeners that this is not an isolated or historical act, but rather an ongoing campaign by the Zionist Occupational Government (ZOG, or more generally, the Jews). Finally, where the KMP and the ballad itself called for defense of the race and the honor of its women, the track calls for the reclamation of the nation, suggesting that necessary action goes beyond defense to recuperation and renewal.

These two songs highlight a number of important shifts in white supremacy and popular culture. First, where racially charged songs were once accepted and applauded (regionally, if not universally by 1915), today, they are unpopular, marginal, and taboo. Indeed, white supremacy, formerly a shared value and perceived natural fact, has become contested, a persistent structure held under erasure by colorblindness, new racism, and multiculturalism. Second, in contrast with the common sense narrative or recitation of the ballad, ‘The Knights of Mary Phagan’ offers an argument, rather explicitly advancing racialized rhetoric to make claims about the current condition. Third, the language, tone, and style of the songs expose profound changes. Not only does hard rock (somewhere between punk and metal) replace the fiddle and folks stylings of yore, but the imperiled state of whiteness is more urgent, the action depicted more vulgar and violent, and the references to difference more denigrating and starkly anti-Semitic. Fourth, the regional and racial references in ‘Little Mary Phagan’ give way to a new imagining of race and nation, in which whiteness has more global and trans historical referents, can be seen as the foundation for a nation distinct from and opposed to the USA, and in an existential struggle with ZOG (Jews). Importantly, in spite of changes in technology and the visibility of white nationalism, music sits at the core of the movement into the present moment. Moreover, the changing place and presence of mainstream popular culture and the dialectics between cultural integration and white nationalist formation compelled a continued emphasis on counter cultural production from white supremacist spaces.
Isn’t It Ironic

Asa Carter, whose career and critique opened this essay, seized upon what he understood to be a fundamental contradiction that many think should make hate rock unthinkable. Rock music emerges from a hybrid space, mixing sonic traditions, cultural behaviors, and racialized bodies (cf. Lipsitz). For Carter and many others in the late 1950s and early 1960s, these polycultural patterns of integration challenged the rule of Jim Crow and threatened their understanding of race relations, the boundaries of whiteness, and the social order. By and large, producers and consumers of popular music do not consider this origin story when writing, recording, performing or listening to a recent release or personally meaningful song. And much the same is true for participants in the white power music scene.

On the one hand, the commercial music industry, beginning at roughly the moment of Carter’s campaign, whitened popular music, reworking its polycultural beginnings for increasingly discrete, if not segregated, niche markets defined by race, class, and gender. As a consequence, rock music does not so much conjure a multiracial social scene or musical style, as refer to white artists—the Beatles and Rolling Stones, AC/DC and Rush, Led Zeppelin and Areosmith—while soul, R’n’B, urban contemporary, Latin and so forth mark music by and for people of color.

On the other hand, the racial politics of popular music shifted after rock ‘n’ roll allegedly became white. Over the past two decades, the normalcy of rock has been contrasted with the deviancy, hypersexuality, and violence of hip-hop and the oppositional waves of (white) alternative music. In common with many pundits and parents, hate rock holds the former in contempt, viewing it as a degenerate genre and social ill. At the same time, it engages with the latter, drawing on punk, metal, hardcore, and even neofolk to communicate its ideology and hail prospective adherents to it.

Without setting aside the irony of white separatist and white supremacist music policing racial boundaries and reiterating racial hierarchies, two other elements crucial to the white power music scene merit emphasis. First, commercial music came to make and market the same racial categories that Carter sought to defend in his campaign. Second, where whiteness came to displace the polycultural foundations of rock music, blackness remained a social problem and source of moral panics over the past half century.
Remapping the Musical Landscape

One map of the contemporary American musical landscape might suggest a rather deep, if not complete, separation between various popular styles, whether rock, jazz, alternative, roots, or hip-hop, and white power rock. After all, the latter centers on hate, a coming race war, and imperiled whiteness—themes rarely found in the pop charts, not to mention polite conversation. Such a rendering would, however, misconstrue the contours of mainstream music and its entanglements with race and racism. I offer three fragments to render an impressionistic portrait.

Writing in the late 1970s, musician and critic Lester Bangs offered a scathing assessment of the place of race in the underground music scene (cf. also Kennedy). Lifting the veil off hipster life and its extremities, he probes an emerging contradiction in the wake of the civil rights movement; most hipsters, like most white Americans ‘don’t have to try at all to be a racist’. He recounts a series of incidents and observations that should trouble the avant-garde, but do not. For instance, he notes, in the shadow of the Vietnam War, a long-forgotten band called Shrapnel regularly played a song ‘Hey, Little Gook!’; and he describes Iggy Pop introducing a song, ‘Our next selection tonight for all you Hebrew ladies in the audience is entitled “Rich Bitch!”’ His concern goes beyond shock value and pushing limits, recounting an appearance of Miriam Linna of the Cramps ‘posing proudly’ in ‘leathers and shades and pistol in front of the headquarters of the United White People’s Party, under a sign bearing three flags “GOD” (cross), “COUNTRY” (stars and stripes), “RACE” (swastika)’ (Bangs 1979).

This linkage of America and whiteness slides with disturbing ease into an embrace of white power imagery, which Bangs insists is about more than getting a rise through performance art. Like the use of Nazi imagery in British punk in the same era, these limit projects do more to show the limitlessness of white privilege and the limited capacity of hipsters to revalue white racist imagery. But then, as others in the underground scene suggest, perhaps ascribing sincerity to much of their culture work is giving them too much credit. As Bangs observes, Nico, member of the acclaimed Velvet Underground, who performed ‘Deutschland über Alles’ at CBGB, lamented the loss of a record contract in a later interview: ‘I made a mistake. I said in Melody Maker [...] that I didn’t like negroes. That’s all. They took it so personally [...] I don’t like the features. They’re so much like animals [...] its cannibals, no?’ (Bangs, emphasis original)

At the close of his short catalog of opinion, utterances, and encounters, Bangs has resigned himself to a rather troubling conclusion: ‘When I started..."
writing this, I was worried I might trigger incidents of punk-bashing by black gangs. Now I realize that nobody cares. Most white people think the whole subject of racism is boring'. Of course, for the artists he discusses and many other hipsters at the time racism was fun, racism was powerful (both as it reinforced and held the promise of upsetting the system). This power, of course, is an unrecognized bridge between the hip, fashionable, and proper experiments of the avant-garde on one side and the vulgar, uncouth, and unacceptable stylings of white power on the other.

Speaking in 1997, Glenn Danzig (né Glenn Allen Anzalone), founding member of The Misfits and Samhain and later successful solo artist, sat for an interview with Steven Blush of Seconds magazine. While much of the discussion centers on his musical endeavors and business ventures, near the end, the conversation swerves to race. Danzig proceeds to reaffirm his past statements that he did not think that there was anything ‘wrong with being proud of being white’, adding comments on a possible race war and the oppressive nature of what he read as double standards. He closes with a flourish:

I’m going to say something very controversial: if you are African-American and you don’t want to live by White people, that should be your choice. [...] The flipside of that is why shouldn’t there be areas a Black person can’t go? If a White person doesn’t want to live with Black people, that’s their decision. This is America; do what you want to do.

In his comments, he has completely reframed racism, advocating racial segregation and separation (Jim Crow style) in the rubric of colorblindness and abstract liberalism (everyone can make an individual choice). This blend is at once in keeping with much of what neoconservatives say about race and racism amid a neoliberal backlash against the civil rights movement and an endorsement of white nationalists’ embrace of heritage, love of one’s people, and defense of one’s race. Not surprisingly, discussants on Stormfront love this interview and hold Danzig in high regard (‘Danzig on White Pride and Racism’).

Although not as effusive, in a 2010 Playboy interview, popular singer/songwriter John Mayer also invoked themes more familiar from white nationalist discussion forums.

PLAYBOY: If you didn’t know you, would you think you’re a douche bag?
MAYER: It depends on what I picked up. My two biggest hits are ‘Your Body Is a Wonderland’ and ‘Daughters’. If you think those songs are
pandering, then you'll think I'm a douche bag. It's like I come on very strong. I am a very...I'm just very. V-E-R-Y. And if you can't handle very, then I'm a douche bag. But I think the world needs a little very. That's why black people love me.

[...]
PLAYBOY: Do black women throw themselves at you?
MAYER: I don't think I open myself to it. My dick is sort of like a white supremacist. I've got a Benetton heart and a fuckin' David Duke cock. I'm going to start dating separately from my dick.

His hasty apologies following publication suggest he thought the broader public would not like the man behind the media persona, when they read of his multicultural heart and ‘David Duke cock’. It is quite telling that one can have a schizophrenic relationship with race, embracing, but not desiring, diversity, accepting difference as a fashion statement or marketing campaign, but rejecting it as a pathway to intimacy and carnality. What's worse, it is not simply that Mayer so easily compartmentalizes race, desire, and aspects of himself, but that he so comfortably refers to the central marker of his masculinity in this conversation as an infamous white supremacist: what does it mean to internalize such an identification and declare it so openly to the world?

The point of this remapping is not to argue that John Mayer inspires hate rock, or to locate its origins within the hipster scene of the late 1970s. Rather, in these passing comments and deeply held sentiments deeper, ongoing dialogues about racial difference, dialogues that call into question progressive narratives of being beyond race and comfortable dissociations around taste and style. Indeed, it may be the case that these anecdotes reveal how shifting racial mores have dictated a renegotiation of stage and backstage performances, of public and private codes of conduct, and how these in turn dictate racial etiquette and self-presentation in a society committed to colorblindness. In turn, they likely suggest how and why producers and performers of white power rock continue to find in pop music the promise of conversion of and crossing over to the mainstream.

Unpopular Culture

If Asa Carter had had his way, parents and politicians would have prohibited rock music, putting a decisive end to what he saw as a corrupt musical fashion and arguably more importantly saving the white race from certain
moral degradation and cultural decline. Despite his best efforts, rock ‘n’ roll did not die, a fact many who make white power music today likely greet with great joy, because it constitutes a core of the social scene and political ideology anchoring the movement today. For all of this, while white power engages with and appropriates pop music for its own ends, it remains wildly unpopular, as evidenced by market share, public outrage and condemnation, and the reaction to it within other music subcultures, perhaps notably in punk songs like ‘Nazi Punks Fuck Off’ by the Dead Kennedys and ‘Fuck the K.K.K.’ by the Unseen (cf. Spracklen).

This unpopularity has crystallized across the past century. Where white supremacist music (like white racism generally) once enjoyed a warm welcome in public life, especially in areas ruled by Jim Crow and that nurtured the reinvention of the Ku Klux Klan as a mainstream fraternal order, it now largely dwells on the margins, emergent in transgressive and oppositional subcultures. My discussion of songs about Mary Phagan underscores the decline and marginalization of white power, especially in popular culture. Nevertheless, music has proven to be especially fecund, enabling adaption and elaboration of style and sound. For all of its engagements with popular music, hate rock remains unpopular. It is perhaps best described as unpopular culture, that is, a set of cultural practices and cultural productions that draw upon and deploy popular stylings but have little claim beyond a bounded social field on audience, desire, or fashion.

The unpopularity of white power music certainly derives from the tastes of audiences and artists in Europe and the USA. For its part, the music industry has never embraced it, seeing it neither as an acceptable market nor its producers or consumers as viable. And where new media has created alternative platforms that increase the appeal and audience of white power music, scholars of popular culture have largely neglected the subject, underscoring its unpopularity and reinforcing the idea that it can be disentangled from more popular musical forms. Even the special issue of Popular Music and Society on hate rock in 2007 stands as an exception to the overriding tendency to ignore, demonize, and/or marginalize. In large measure, this likely derives from the shared values of those who create, commercialize, and consume music and those who study it and study them. It may arise, moreover, from the blurring of the boundaries formerly separating fans from scholars, and since few scholars openly embrace white power, and those who have done have become pariahs, there is little chance it will become a more popular subject in the field. Finally, the subcultures, sentiments, and stylings of white power make it difficult to place it in some of the dominant narrative frames of pop culture studies. The very
deviance and hate that attract disaffected whites to it complicate efforts to speak favorably of identity or resistance, for example. Whatever its cause, this pattern of neglect, as I have endeavored to demonstrate in this study, diminishes our understanding of white power and mainstream society, impairing our capacity to understand the entanglements, shared histories, and overlapping ideologies as well as the antagonism and alienation that foster outburst common to the white power scene and increasingly common in acts like the attack on Sikh Temple in Wisconsin in 2012.

Notes

1. Cf. Burghart; Corte and Edwards; Dyck; Futrell et al; Kim; Mann 2008; Messner et al.

Works Cited


