The Struggle for Respectability or Riot? Black Popular Culture in the 1960s and 1970s

Did Black popular culture in the late 1960s and 1970s reflect or deflect from the intensity of struggle for Civil Rights during this period? How did this new Black popular culture draw on stereotypical representations of African-Americans in white popular culture?

The official 'Civil Rights Movement' began in 1954 with the US Supreme Court striking down the racist 'separate but equal' doctrine and ended with the Civil Rights Act of 1968. However, the struggle for Civil Rights was a social movement, as much as it was a legal challenge, and as such it extended long after legal rights were won. Black popular culture including music, television, films, books, magazines, sport and fashion were important sites of social change during the 1960s and 1970s. However we cannot see these African-American products as a simple narrative of Black Nationalism. Jon Kraszewski explains that different groups 'differed on what nationalism was and what nationalism did.'[1] Opposing values such as integration as to separatism and gradual progression as to violent uprising complicated the movement. Often within the one cultural artefact some contemporary critics saw the empowerment of Black people, while, simultaneously, others perceived a continued white oppression under a thin veil of 'Blackness.' The use of Black stereotypes are particularly contested. Kobena Mercer argues that Black stereotypes such as the sexual 'savage' or the 'untouched' African, have been historically based on the 'needs, demands and desires of white males' under what

[1] Jon Kraszewski, "Recontextualizing the Historical Reception of Blaxploitation: Articulations of Class, Black Nationalism, and Anxiety in the Genre's Advertisements," *Velvet Light Trap*, no. 50 (2002): p.50.

Foucault labelled the 'regime of truth' of the privileged.[2] However, during this period historians can also see examples of Black people taking ownership of their stereotypes and appropriating old tropes for their own purposes. Analysing Black popular culture in terms of content as well as its influences allows historians to see how it played important roles in both normalising and problematising 'Blackness' in white society. As such Black popular culture both reflected *and* deflected from the striving for Civil Rights depending on what the beholder saw the struggle to be about. What tips the balance towards Black popular culture being a positive force in the 1960s and 1970s is that these discussions were being had at all; Black voices finally mattered in a white-dominated society.

Music was an area in which Black popular culture attracted widespread attention from the beginning of the 1960s, particularly as the result of Berry Gordy's hugely successful Motown Record Corporation. Motown in this era featured exclusively Black artists and produced a very distinctive 'Black' sound. This was a significant development in the racial integration of popular music; Motown created megastars such as the Supremes and the Four Tops who were loved by Black and white audiences alike. Yet this universality may have come at the cost of 'diluting Blackness.' Music critic Jon Landau argued in 1967, that in order to maintain popularity with white audiences, Motown created a formula for success based largely on simplicity and repetition and then set about 'imposing it on all of their artists, one way or another.'[3] Yet many still see Motown as a significant empowerment of African-Americans to overturn harmful stereotypes. Mercer argues that classic Motown critiqued 'some of the

[2] Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.133, 136.
[3] Jon Landau, "Motown: A Whiter Shade of Black," in *The Rock History Reader*, ed. Theo Cateforis (New York: Routledge, 2007), p.71.

vagaries in certain models of Black family life and fatherhood.'[4] This focus on family could also be seen however, as a way of moralising the music to make Black representations 'safe' for white audiences.

These critiques of Motown aside, Black music did advance greatly in the 1960s and 1970s and became increasingly politicised. Soul musician Curtis Mayfield explained that 'Painless preaching is as good a term as any for what we do.'[5] There is scarcely a more obvious example of this than the funk band Parliament's *Chocolate City.* Mia Anderson argues that the political movement from 'Black militancy and oppression to Black voting power' is obvious in lyrics such as 'you don't need the bullet when you got the ballot.'[6] Yet Black music did not have to be overtly political to play a political role. The emergence of disco in the late 1970s represented an amalgamation of Black and Gay Liberation in the joint subversion of social standards and in the denial of police prosecution.[7] The Gay community found a natural ally in Black activism, as African-Americans faced disproportional oppression under white middle-class sexual morality, which censored the Black body.

Many saw the appearance of Black programs on television as part of a new 'assimilationist era.' Frank Stanton, the president of CBS, implored broadcasters in 1964 to support Civil

[4] Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, p.140.
[5] John Douglas Baskerville, *The Impact of Modern Black Nationalist Ideology and Cultural Revitalization on American Jazz Music of the 1960s and 1970s,* Iowa: ProQuest Dissertations, 1997, p.67.
[6] Mia Anderson, "'I Dig You, Chocolate City': Ebony and Sepia Magazines' Coverage of Black Political Progress 1971–1977," *Journal of African American Studies* 19, no.4 (2015): p.399.
[7] Reynaldo Anderson, "Fabulous: Sylvester James, Black Queer Afrofuturism, and the Black Fantastic," *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 4, no.2 (2013): n.p.

Rights with a 'mighty and continuing editorial crusade.'[8] Characters such as Alexander Scott of 'I Spy' were not defined by their Blackness and avoided exaggerated stereotypes.'[9] While there is no doubt that this was an improvement on the wildly offensive *Amos 'n' Andy* of the 1950s, many resented the 'whitewashing' of Black reality. *Julia*, debuting in 1968, simultaneously came under fire for both avoiding dealing with contemporary social issues, instead presenting a fantastical 'white Negro' and for continuing the matriarchal stereotype.[10] In 1974 the *Good Times* aired a complete Black family for the first time. John Amos, who played the father, explains how the cast 'felt a tremendous obligation and responsibility to portray the most positive view possible of the Black family."[11] However this initial optimism soon turned sour when disagreements over script content, which favoured comedic antics over any serious content, caused both Amos and his on-screen wife Esther Rolle to leave the show. Rolle argued that the portrayal of the show's characters was 'an insult, an outrage.'[12] However, when the show's popularity dropped dramatically, the producers convinced Rolle to return with an increased wage and the promise of better scripts. Although African-American representation on television was still far from ideal, historians can see here the increasing influence of African-American's over their own representation.

These concerns about the portrayal of African-American characters can also be seen in debates surrounding Black films. Sidney Poitier, who was the most iconic Black figure of early

[8] Fred J. MacDonald, "The Golden Age of Blacks in Television: The Late 1960s," *Blacks and White TV: African Americans in Television Since 1948*, n.d. Accessed 4 Jan. 2016, http://jfredmacdonald.com/bawtv/bawtv10.htm, n.p.
[9] *Ibid*., n.p.
[10] *Ibid*., n.p.
[11] Davis Monroe, *A Time to Laugh: Black TV Sitcoms and their Influence on the Black Family*, 1951-1992 (Baltimore: ProQuest Dissertations, 2013), p.69.
[12] *Ibid*., p.82.

1960s films, featured heavily in 'desexualised' roles assisting white people. Nationalist critics spurned this 'white Negro' role, but it is significant that for much of the Black population who frequented these films it was refreshing to see a much less offensive Black stereotype.[13] Even more controversial was the antithesis of Sidney Poitier movies; the Blaxploitation films initiated by Martin Van Peebles' 1971 film, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. Robert Weems argues that Blaxploitation films reflected the 'exaltation of the Black male' based on his dominance both within violent crime and sexual relations.[14] What worsened this effect, as Kraszewski explains, is that advertisements 'fixated on images of violence and sex associated with revolutionary nationalism' without reference to its political messages.[15] Due to this, Blaxploitation is seen by some as a continuation of harmful stereotypes about mindless savage Black men. Mercer argues how 'the conflictual formation of the "hustler" should be seen on a continuum with the issue of internalised oppression.'[16] Justin Griffin of the Black Panther Party expressed his dismay in no uncertain terms: 'we go on paying millions of dollars for our own cultural genocide.'[17] However, these views were certainly not universal and some resented such moral 'gatekeeping'. Ron O'Neal, who starred in *Superfly,* reflected an oppositional view, informed by the widening Black class divide, proclaiming: 'I'm so sick and tired of handkerchief-headed Negroes moralising on the poor Black man.'[18] For some African-Americans, to critique Blaxploitation was to take the 'side' of the whites and their values.

[13] Robert E. Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 81.
[14] *Ibid*., p.83.
[15] Kraszewski, "Recontextualizing the Historical Reception of Blaxploitation," p.57.
[16] Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, p.145.
[17] Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar*, p.85.
[18] *Ibid*., p.87.

Sweet Sweetback was ground-breaking in that it was created by a Black man who achieved widespread success, in a white-dominated industry. The film grossed $10 million within a couple of months, from a budget of half a million.[19] This film became a model for a flurry of 'copycats' produced by a financially ailing Hollywood. However, although, unlike earlier films of the period, Blaxploitation was focused on Black characters in Black communities, it is significant that they were still mostly financially controlled by white producers. Richard Roundtree, the lead of *Shaft,* received just $12 500, despite the low budget film grossing more than $17 million.[20] This indication of economic empowerment lingering behind social progression, is supported by the fact that despite a much greater African-American presence in front of the camera, behind-camera minority representation remained shockingly low in the 1970s.[21]

Although much less within the cultural history spotlight, Black literature was in many ways a precursor to the Blaxploitation movement. Holloway House was founded in 1961 by white copywriters as a publishing company for 'Black experience' fiction.[22] Like the Blaxploitation films that were to follow, these popular stories often reflected the perspective of pimps, hustlers and criminals.[23] Holloway House followed the same trends as the marketing of Blaxploitation; Justin Gifford argues that they 'attempted to neutralize any political or racial messages of the novels by consistently advertising them, regardless of content, as spectacles

[19] Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar*, p.82.
[20] *Ibid*., p.88.
[21] Andrew Dawson, "Challenging Lilywhite Hollywood: African Americans and the Demand for Racial Equality in the Motion Picture Industry, 1963–1974," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 45, no.6 (2012): p.1221.
[22] Justin Gifford, "'Something Like a Harlem Renaissance West': Black Popular Fiction, Self-Publishing, and the Origins of Street Literature: Interviews with Dr. Roland Jefferson and Odie Hawkins*," Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 40, no.4 (2015): p.217.
[23] Gifford, "Something Like a Harlem Renaissance West," p.217.

of sex and violence.'[24] Author Roland Jefferson, explained how he provided them with 'a list of all of the publications that I knew that were primarily African American political instruments like *The Black Scholar* and *Freedomways*,' yet instead 'I think they took out an ad in *Players*, the Black version of *Playboy*.[25] As such, much of the radical potential of Jefferson's work was stifled. However, this does not mean that these publications did not signify significant developments of the Civil Rights Movement; at the very least they were part of increasing African-American education and career opportunities. Writer Odie Hawkins explains how he was 'being conditioned to pimp,' but his teacher inspired him with the 'idea of being a writer rather than a thug.[26]

African-American ownership and control, allowed a number of prominent magazines to exert a much more direct influence on Black Nationalism during this same period. There was a great division between magazines such as the more middle-class, integrationist *Ebony* and the lower-class, separatist *Sepia*.[27] However what they had in common was a strong focus on African-American involvement in politics.'[28] These magazines also allowed for dissenting and marginalised voices, within the Civil Rights Movement itself, to be heard. This is particularly the case for nationalist women. Mercer argues that the 'cultural reconstruction of the Black subject' was done at the expense of women, because of its 'masculinist' focus.[29] A Black psychologist discussed how in the 1973 Blaxploitation film *The Mack,* the women 'came

[24] Gifford, "Something Like a Harlem Renaissance West," p.219.
[25] *Ibid*., p.222.
[26] *Ibid*., p.230.
[27] Anderson, "I Dig You, Chocolate City," p.403-4.
[28] *Ibid*., p.408.
[29] Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, p.139.

across as being so stupid and naïve that the question of retardation has been raised.'[30] Black activist, Stokely Carmichael, is famously quoted as declaring that 'the only position for women in SNCC is prone.'[31] It is likely that he intended this to be a joke, but nevertheless it reflected some painful truths of the movement. Examples from The *Liberator,* which proclaimed itself to be 'The Voice of the Black Protest Movement' in its letterhead, demonstrate how Black women were given a voice in magazines, denied to them in many other mediums.[32] Betty Frank argued in 1966 that "the Black man frustrated by white America, turns inwards to a perverted form of male supremacy in his relationship with the Black woman."[33] Louise Moore simply exclaimed in 1969, 'We are tired of being cheated of our womanhood by Black men.'[34]

While these new Black mediums represented significant new opportunities for Black expression, the struggle for Civil Rights was also being fought in long-established realms of 'Blackness.' An affinity for physical pursuits have typically been part of one of the many stereotypes of African-Americans. Mercer points to the historical 'superexploitation of the Black body as muscle-machine,' which is seen in opposition to intelligent humanity.[35] Yet Black sporting heroes of the 1960s and 1970s demonstrated the ability to politicise the physical. The most overt example of this is the boxer Muhammad Ali, who was very aware of the restrictions of racist stereotyping: 'I felt they [white sports officials] were saying they would accept me […] only if I played the role of the dumb, brute athlete."[36] Ali used his global

[30] Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar*, p.84.
[31] Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, p.139.
[32] Christopher M Tinson, "'The Voice of the Black Protest Movement:' Notes on the 'Liberator' Magazine and Black Radicalism in the Early 1960s," *The Black Scholar* 37, no.4. (2008): p.4.
[33] *Ibid*., p.12.
[34] *Ibid*., p.12.
[35] Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, p.138.
[36] Lewis A. Erenberg, "'Rumble in the Jungle': Muhammad Ali vs. George Foreman in the Age of Global Spectacle," *Journal of Sport History* 39, no.1 (2012): p.86.

presence to passionately advocate for Black Nationalism and freedom from white hegemony. However, a lot of his anger was also directed at Black people whose perception of the Civil Rights Movement did not match his own. He perceived a trend amongst prominent African-Americans: 'the whites make 'em rich and in return they brainwash the little Negroes walking around.'[37] Ali represents the strong Black class anxiety at the time; that somehow entering the middle class made one less 'Black'. Despite having enough money to live extravagantly, Ali proudly proclaimed that he lived in 'a slum with my people.'[38]

This 'civil war' within Civil Rights is particularly illustrated by the 1974 boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman. Ali overtly declared the fight to be an ideological battle, 'I'm the freedom fighter and Foreman will be fighting for the establishment.'[39] In the 1968 Olympics, Foreman celebrated a gold medal by proudly waving a US flag. This was seen as a response to the Black Power salute of Tommie Smith and John Carlos.[40] Yet it is an oversimplification to cast Foreman on the 'side' of white domination. This fight could perhaps more accurately be seen as between striving for independence as to inclusion. Foreman explained: "how could I protest the Establishment when it had created the Job Corps for guys like me? […] I'd been lifted by an airplane out of poverty into a place where for the first time I ate three hot meals a day."[41] The increasing social and economic mobility of 1960s and 1970s, encouraged opened up 'white advantage' to some Black Americans for the first time.

[37] Erenberg, "'Rumble in the Jungle,' p.84.
[38] *Ibid*., p.84.
[39] *Ibid*., p.82.
[40] *Ibid*., p.87.
[41] *Ibid*., p.88.

Yet issues of class still imposed limitations on this, as the gap between 'respectable Blacks' and the 'other' of the poor Black masses widened.

In the middle ground between radical nationalism and integration, Kraszewski explains that cultural nationalists sought to 'embrace African clothing, languages and hairstyles,' with powerful, but peaceful slogans such as 'Black is Beautiful.'[42] James Davis, opening a clothes shop in 1963, explained that his 'traditional African designs' were designed to 'encourage a cultural concept of self.'[43] Although the authenticity of the fashions' connection with African history is questionable, for many African-Americans this cultural movement gave them a way of defining themselves without reference to how they fit in with white Americans. These aesthetics were also a way of creating solidarity; to dress this way was to subscribe to the Black community. Black activist, Angela Davis recalls how 'whenever I would wear my Afro I'd get pulled over by the police' who were searching for Black male suspects because 'we all wore the same hairstyle.'[44] One Black woman even proclaimed that 'she hoped she could serve as a decoy' in this way.[45]

As much as this cultural movement appeared to be about taking ownership of, and injecting pride into, the stereotype of an 'untouched Africa,' the reality was much more complicated. White corporate interests pervaded these African expressions. Weems explains how when the buying power of Black Americans became obvious, white corporations no longer left Black

[42] Kraszewski, "Recontextualizing the Historical Reception of Blaxploitation," p.51.
[43] Tanisha C. Ford*, Soul Generation: Radical Fashion, Beauty, and the Transnational Black Liberation Movement, 1954-1980* (Indiana: ProQuest Dissertations, 2011), p.147.
[44] *Ibid*., p.188.
[45] *Ibid*., p.189.

markets alone, to the detriment of African-American business.[46] Nationalist Ann Cook explains how she was horrified to discover that 'most of the Black models preferred to sell their Blackness to white agencies'; watering down their culture with 'African-print bikinis,' for the higher wages they could pay.[47] This can be seen as part of a story of continued white corporate control over Black subjects. However, many still did subvert white influence: Amye Glover explained how she 'designed and made my own clothes,' which were 'loud and bright like the colours over in Africa.'[48]

Black popular culture of the 1960s and 1970s simultaneously reflected and deflected the Civil Rights Movement, due to the conflicting aims of different groups. Some Black music may have made compromises for popularity with white audiences, but it also propagated both overt and indirect political messages. Television and films were highly contested grounds and accusations of negative stereotypes were rife, but ultimately the era saw increasing Black visibility and voices. Books may have faced the same ownership problems that films experienced, but Black magazines facilitated unmediated Black expression. Sport allowed very public debate between Black separatists and integrationists, while fashion was significant for creating shared identity, even if it had a complicated relationship with commercialism. Overall, the role of Black popular culture can be seen to support the struggle for Civil Rights because of the proliferation of Black expression in the public domain and the passionate contemporary debate, which illustrates the increasing political consciousness of a historically oppressed group.

[46] Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar*, p.99.
[47] Ford, *Soul Generation*, p.198.
[48] *Ibid*., p.199.

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