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Assignment 3, Racial and Social Awareness in the '60s

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The development of African American voice throughout the 60s, as it evolved from Gospel to Motown, reflects the political commentary and social aspirations of the particular moment they sprung from. The delivery of message varies drastically from the upbeat rhythm of the Temptations (which masked somber lyrics) to the unboxable, unique nature of Funk. It seems that the shift from Civil Rights to Cultural Nationalism and Radicalism, is reflected in the degree to which African American's music, appearance, and performative aspects were made palatable for white folx. Most importantly, throughout each genre of African American music there is a clear commitment to securing Black joy and offering reprieve.

The Temptations, in their medley performance on the Ed Sullivan show, provide insight into the expectations of African American performers at the time. The choreography and synchronicity they exhibit feels like an attempt to reject the stereotypes of African American performers as less professional or less deserving of taking up space in creative, "loud" ways. They are clearly well practiced and in sync with one another, especially in their outfits, but it feels like they sacrifice individuality in order to achieve it. There is freedom, however, in their vocal ranges and what type of voice is deemed valuable since they all contribute – from Eddie Kendricks' incredibly high notes to David Ruffin's raspy composition. The songs are catchy, upbeat, and as we see with the band members, easy to dance to. However, the lyrics are often about loss, wronging a loved one, etc. which reminds me of the function of slave hymns. Many Ethnic Studies scholars identify slave hymns as instances in which community was built on the sharing of sad messages through relatively joyous sounding music – primarily so that their thoughts and emotions were protected from white onlookers. The Ed Sullivan show provided an undeniable opportunity to reach massive, diverse

audiences and I suspect their performance was reflective of their concern that they be successful – which often meant impressing white-owned record labels, clubs, etc but still wanting to cater their message to those who looked like them.

The genre Soul, exemplified by The Staple Singers in their song “Sit Down Servant,” feels entirely driven by the strong female voice. The heavy reliance on a lead vocalist, and a chorus of voices supporting them, replicates the dynamics of a preacher and choir. The music is kept somewhat simple, for it is really the voice or the sermon that they want heard. The eyes of the lead singer in this song, reflected in other female soul artists I watched, show a certain level of exhaustion and sadness that I feel like is uniquely held by African American women. Even in the lyrics of the song, where the angels of heaven are begging the humble servant to sit down, the servant is still possessed by a passion and fervor that lets them not rest. The protests and tribulations of this time period required so much emotional and physical labor on the part of African Americans as they sought to resist while still having to prioritize basic survival. Overall, the “soul” of the music is completely infused by the varying strain that the female vocalists place on their voice throughout their songs – sometimes possessing a guttural force and other times being positively melodic. There is a clear infusion of spirit derived from God as well, as many of their songs have biblical symbolism and the use of clapping is a signal to the ways in which people are moved in the pews to join in!

George Clinton helped to revolutionize Funk in the late ‘60s and throughout the ‘70s with his band Funkadelic and its sister band Parliament. Formed in 1968 in Plainfield, New Jersey, Funkadelic combined the well known sounds of soul and assembly line approach of Motown with the acid rock inspired tones of Frank Zappa and Jimi Hendrix. This shift from church inspired gospel and soul to more rhythmically psychedelic danceable beats can be heard in Funkadelic’s “Cosmic Slop.” The track details the story of a woman who is left to support her family by working as a prostitute, despite her internal struggle of being a religious woman who fears disappointing God by “dancing”

with the Devil. The song's incisive lyrics make commentary on the instinct to take care of your children by whatever means necessary.

Despite the depth of the lyrics, the message is somewhat overlooked due to the track's hypnotically groovy beat that ignites the desire to get up and dance. The juxtaposition of the lyrics and beat is emphasized throughout the music video which utilizes the "acid" rock sound quite literally as Clinton and Funkadelic are shown in an LSD induced dance sequence of animal masks and free flowing movement.

Similarly to Funkadelic, Jimi Hendrix utilized influences from Motown and Soul. More specifically, Hendrix combined the old sounds of American Blues from the early '60s with lighter more mesmerizing beats that spoke to a younger audience. Inspiring the revival of soul in the United States by revolutionizing the acid rock sound, Hendrix not only popularized, but perfected electrically exhilarating guitar riffs that pushed the boundaries of what music could sound like. In addition to igniting the public's interest in acid rock, Hendrix's chaotic on-stage antics that walked the line between danger and sexual tension reimaged what it meant to be a rockstar. Hendrix's performance of "Rock Me Baby" at the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967 reasserts this futuristic psychedelic acid rock sound that arose during this time, all while maintaining a distinct individuality with his intoxicating stage presence. Originally released as a Blues track by Lil' Son Jackson in 1951, Hendrix made it his own by adding electric improvisations and distorted guitars that were characteristic of the acid rock sound.

The evolution of Soul, Motown, Funk, and Blues relied on the inspiration of each previous genre and the ability to build off of one another. The ever changing political climate during the Civil Rights Movement to Cultural Nationalism and Radicalism all directly impacted the monumental and transformative sounds of the '60s.