

EMISFÉRICA

Musical Miscegenation? Rock Music and the History of Sex

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“So, when it comes, miscegenation will be a terror ...”

Norman Mailer, “The White Negro,” 1957

When pop music critic Sasha Frere-Jones wondered aloud in the *New Yorker* magazine as to how, when, and why “indie rock lost its soul” in the mid-1990s, he provoked a small controversy among popular music critics, bloggers, and fans. Lamenting rock’s decreasing reliance on what he described as “the ecstatic singing and intense, voicelike guitar tones of the blues, the heavy African downbeat, and the elaborate showmanship that characterized black music of the mid-twentieth century,” Frere-Jones targeted contemporary musicians that he considered to be guilty of divorcing (white) rock from its (black) roots (Frere-Jones 2007a). Part of his argument resembled prior cases made by music critics like Albert Murray (1990) and Kandia Crazy Horse (2004), who have also extolled the universal basis and relevance of black music. But it took a peculiar turn when he attributed the steady diminution of black heat, rhythm, and ecstasy in 1990s and 2000s rock to a cultural separatism jointly enforced by hip hop and academic political correctness.

In responding, some of Frere-Jones’s interlocutors, like Ann Powers (2007) of the *Los Angeles Times*, were skeptical, pointing to his arbitrary sampling of musical acts. Others, like Carl Wilson (2007) of *Slate*, agree that the musical development Frere-Jones pointed to was real, but took issue with his explanation for it.¹ Still others threw up their hands at the whole tenor of the intervention, which they took to be an exercise in bad faith. On this score, one reader objected to the metaphor Frere-Jones chose to evoke his lost era of intense and ecstatic rock showmanship. “Why are you using the term “miscegenation,” which traditionally (and etymologically) has an extremely negative connotation?” this reader wondered. “Why not use ‘cross-fertilization,’ ‘cross-pollination,’ or ‘hybridization’?” (Frere-Jones 2007b). To this Frere-Jones responded on his blog:

It’s a delicate and powerful word, and I chose it deliberately. My piece is about American rock music, placed in the larger context of American pop, and framed by the fact—I claim it as fact and not opinion—that musical miscegenation is what started the whole ball rolling. Indie rock, in this piece, is the index of how American musical miscegenation has changed over time and will likely not happen in the same way again. I am also aware of, and comfortable with, the non-musical meanings of the word “miscegenation.” There are long American traditions of both advocating miscegenation (Ralph Waldo Emerson’s concept of the “smelting pot” is

one of the better known tropes) and trying to prevent it, either by outlawing mixed-race marriage or banning representations of miscegenation in film. Also, I wanted the word to emphasize the rough nature of pop, a genre rooted in theft, jury-rigged machines, and barely legal alliances. The birth of rock and roll itself was not a happy event for everyone involved. Miscegenation involves sex (which, as I point out at the end of my piece, is the original meaning of “rock and roll”) but it doesn’t always involve consent. Miscegenation felt like the right word, warts and all. (Ibid.)

Against a sterile, botanical alternative like “cross-pollination,” Frere-Jones defended his use of “miscegenation” as an earthy and profane non-euphemism. Likening music to history and both to rough and unequal sex, in this and other responses he cast his interlocutors as squeamishly unable (in 2007!) to reckon with the consequences of the “birth of rock and roll,” a “birth” ironically characterized with a euphemistic flurry of his own (“barely legal,” “jury-rigged machine,” and the groan-inducing “not a happy event for everyone involved”).

Frere-Jones may justly pooh-pooh agronomical images like “cross-pollination.” But why represent musical interchange through imagery of racialized sex in the first place? Caught up in his own metaphor, Frere-Jones referred at one point to “the non-musical meanings of the word ‘miscegenation,’” as if his musical meaning was actually the primary one.² But what would this “musical meaning” of miscegenation be, anyway? Isn’t it just a troubling confusion and conflation? While he points to the long history of both extolling and decrying cultural fusion in America, Frere-Jones seems stubbornly resistant to unspooling his tightly wound assumptions around sex and how it has figured in that history. While he considers sex across the color line to be a “delicate and powerful” metaphor for the history of black influence in American music, he ignores the history of sex itself, or rather, the *historicity* of sex, in shaping the unequal destinies of black Americans both within and beyond the music industry. To do otherwise would be to admit that as much as “miscegenation” can be used as a politically incorrect paean to the hot intensity of cultural hybridity, it also can and has historically performed an opposing function.

When Frere-Jones claims “as fact and not opinion—that musical miscegenation is what started the whole ball rolling,” the convenient elision of culture and sexuality in his phrase “musical miscegenation” demonstrates a troubling neglect of the historical role of miscegenation as a discourse, and not simply as a metaphor. What is more, in neglecting this history, Frere-Jones places himself in an unflattering lineage of intellectuals who have used this very discourse of miscegenation to make claims about the ostensible vigor and potency of black culture. There are few ostensible tributes to black music that “A Paler Shade of White” resembles so much as Norman Mailer’s infamous 1957 essay, “The White Negro.” There Mailer notoriously claimed the Negro as existential culture hero, and jazz as “his” quintessential expression. “Knowing in the cells of his existence that life was war,” Mailer wrote breathlessly, black men “lived in the enormous present

... and in his music he gave voice to the ... infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm” (Mailer 1959: 341). Mixing such vividly erotic language with an almost dainty metaphor of domesticity, Mailer likened the effect of jazz on white hipsters to a “wedding” in which blacks “brought the cultural dowry” (ibid: 340). While seemingly flattering to black male musical prowess, such claims replicated the quaintest of assumptions about musical interchange and improvisation, as James Baldwin immediately pointed out at the time (Baldwin 1998: 269-85). The endurance of such retrograde assumptions about black sexuality into the present reflects an unacknowledged debt to originators of the word “miscegenation” itself.

Miscegenation as Political Coinage

Scholars and journalists routinely employ miscegenation, with or without scare quotes, to denote the “mixing” of the so-called races. Even when they pause to think about it, even when, as with Frere-Jones when they are challenged on their use of it, they typically ignore or seem unaware that the word appeared at a particular time and place, and for a particular purpose. Whatever Ralph Emerson meant by the “smelting pot,” for example, he could not have meant “miscegenation” musical or otherwise, simply because the word did not yet exist, and because he chose not to use the closest variant with a racial connotation that did exist at the time, amalgamation.³ While a variety of terms for race, caste, and color “mixing” have emerged from the time of the Encounter with the New World, no single term can accurately index all of that history.⁴ Miscegenation is not the translation of the Spanish *mestizaje* or the Portuguese *mestizagem* it is commonly assumed to be, as both terms long predate it. Nor does it have any etymological relation to words like “mulatto,” “mestizo,” or, for that matter, “hybrid.” It is, to quote William Carlos Williams, a “pure product” of the U.S., a specimen of rhetorical chicanery and pseudo-scientific quackery whose astonishing success at infiltrating the language should only surprise those who doubt the immense resources of racial disavowal in the shaping of our culture.

As Elise Lemire (2002) argues in *“Miscegenation”: Making Race in America*, and as I further detail in *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance and the Ruses of Memory* (Nyong’o 2009), miscegenation was a discourse that emerged within the historical crucible of the U.S. Civil War.⁵ In 1864, as Abraham Lincoln prepared to stand for re-election, an anonymous pamphlet appeared for sale at Dexter, Hamilton, & Co. on Nassau Street entitled “Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the American White Man and the Negro,” carrying the ostensible endorsement of many leading abolitionists, reformers, and Republicans. With willfully provocative chapter titles like “Love of the Blonde for the Black” and “The Mixture of Caucasian and African Blood Essential to American Progress,” the pamphlet boldly struck out against the racial orthodoxies of its day, both conservative and liberal, in proclaiming the ultimate solution to the American racial dilemma to lie in human reproduction.⁶ As a controversy unfolded, those who suspected the pamphlet to be a hoax were proved right, but not before it was denounced in editorial pages, learned journals, and even from the floor of the U.S. Congress.⁷

The “Miscegenation” pamphlet, it was eventually revealed, was co-authored by David Croly and George Wakeman, editor and reporter respectively at the New York *World*, a leading Copperhead, or pro-Democratic Party paper. Their political prank was meant to provoke a barrage of hostility and to set a trap for any unwary abolitionist. The New York *World* itself helped stoke the controversy its own journalists had concocted. It regularly denounced miscegenation, both the idea and the pamphlet, and in the process propelled the fantasy across its front pages and into shop windows, where political prints were sold illustrating its lurid and clearly false account of a “black and tan ball” held at the Lincoln Central Campaign Club. The fictitious Miscegenation Ball portrayed dignified Republican leaders slumming with dusky temptresses in a gorgeous ballroom, signifying not only immoral racial connections, but an ethos of anti-democratic elitism and an unpatriotic display of excessive consumption during wartime.

Miscegenation thus became the first “wedge issue” of the Civil War and Reconstruction period, extending but transforming existing regulations of sex across the color line going back to the colonial period. It did so at a time when white women could not vote and when black men and women had only recently been emancipated from chattel slavery. In a crucial way, miscegenation discourse was about how these potential citizens haunted the white male political imaginary.⁸ What was different about prior legal regulation and the new discourse of miscegenation, in sum, was its emergence in the rivalrous world of politics, a world seen then as now, as predominantly male. It was of course presented as a scientific term, one newly coined by combining the Latin words for “mixing” and “race.”⁹ But this only reflects the waxing prestige of science as a discourse of socio-political control that culminated in the eugenics movement of the early twentieth century. Miscegenation was allegedly a more scientific improvement on “amalgamation,” a word that had been “only borrowed for an emergency” as the pamphlet explained (Croly and Wakeman 1864: ii). The neologism was coined by and for a public sphere of men contesting science and politics among themselves, an arena of homosocial rivalry that, we might say, forms the depth context for the term.

The location of the homosocial public sphere in which “miscegenation” was coined was New York City in the 1860s: a cosmopolitan metropolis where musical and cultural hybridity was visible, audible, and above all, danceable (see Lhamon 1998, Lott 1993, and Anbinder 2001). Its street denizens — Irish immigrants, free black folk, and women — were the very ones whose access to citizenship was contested and denigrated through the new term. Hysterical visions like the Miscegenation Ball were pointed disavowals of actual processes of mixing, interchange, and conviviality. And snobbish references to the way in which the impoverished Irish “herd” with blacks were meant to sting (Croly and Wakeman 1864: 30). At the same time as the pamphlet lampooned the everyday sociality of New York’s immigrant poor, it cocked a snoot at the airs taken on by southern belles and gentlemen, who held on to their “peculiar institution” because they could not bear to part with their dusky lovers. Keeping in mind that both charges (the anti-immigrant and the anti-Southern) were put in the mouths of abolitionist progressives, we can see how the Miscegenation pamphlet tried to put fighting words into the mouths of racial equality’s critics.

Considered as political discourse, miscegenation emerges as a critical keyword in the deployment of heterosexuality. Specifically, the cross-racial heterosexuality it brings to light as a specifically political problem is also a normative one, as it calls upon whites both northern and southern, both immigrant and native-born, to become aware of and to defend society against the potential threat of their own desires. Policing white sexuality, or to be more specific, white desire for sex across color lines, has a long tradition in New World societies. But this specific incitement to discourse within the crucible of wartime and postbellum U.S. society, during the transition, in other words, from slave to citizen, gives miscegenation its enduringly noxious tinge. When, amidst the mid-century desegregationist movement Mailer promised that miscegenation would be a terror when it happened, he did not of course mean that no reproductive sex across the color line had taken place in the U.S. up to that point. Rather, he unwittingly underscored the degree to which the threat of a miscegenation “to come” worked to police and limit the freedom dreams of African Americans. In attributing the loss of black influence in rock to an increasingly assertive black intellectual and cultural sphere (rather than, say, to the enduring apartheid logic in which American music is made, sold, and marketed), Frere-Jones also replicates this discomfiting genealogy of miscegenation.

Conclusion

In taking indie rock to task for abandoning musical blackness, was Frere Jones possibly right, but for the wrong reasons? That is, did the deeply suspect motives generating his turn to the repellent language of miscegenation nonetheless do the useful work of putting the precarity of both rock and rock criticism on view? Was he, alternatively, wrong, but for the right reasons, missing an entire landscape of music that conveniently fell out of his self-fulfilling formula for “indie rock,” unwittingly pointing to the structural racism of the music industry itself, in which the “race record” has never really vanished as a business model, and in which the “independence” of independent rock is merely just one more additional remove, via college radio and white hipsterism, from the multiracial sources of rock and roll?

I confess to having been among the initial readers who threw their hands up at the bad faith of Frere-Jones’s argument. I should be clear by what I mean here. While some critics grouched about the denial of *privilege* (white and male) in using a prestigious forum like the *New Yorker* to complain about how recent black music has scared off potential white interlopers, what concerned me more is the denial of *freedom* apparent in his argument. Bad faith arguments disavow the freedom of those who make them, and seek resentfully to locate this loss of freedom in the actions of others. Frere-Jones’ nostalgia for the end of “an age of innocent—or, at least, guilt-free—pilfering” is squarely attributed to the joint cultural effects of politically correct academics and recklessly aggressive hip-hop masculinities. The very implausibility of such a cultural formation of gangstas and tenured radicals ganging up on youth culture (“as though your parents had come home and turned on the lights”) reflects the degree to which a bad faith argument will pursue its unsound premises rather than confront the agency and responsibility we all possess.

Even though the original *Miscegenation* hoax did not direct itself to *cultural* politics in the above way, there is I believe a lesson to be learned from it here, nonetheless. Elsewhere, I argued that the pamphlet's parodic inhabitation of the defense of miscegenation displayed, as all parody must, some degree of knowledge of, and even affection for, the ideals it denounced. I want to take this argument one step further to reflect not upon the general properties of parody, but the specific characteristics of this particular hoax. Like Mailer, Frere-Jones, and many other critics after them, the authors of the hoax portray whiteness as a condition of loss, absence, and depletion awaiting the revivifying energies of blackness:

The white race [...] need the intermingling of the rich tropic temperament of the negro to give warmth and fullness to their natures. They feel the yearning, and do not know how to interpret it. The physician tells them they must travel to a warmer climate. They recognize in this a glimpse of the want they feel, though they are hopeless of its efficacy to fully restore the lost vitality [...] It is only by the infusion into their very system of the vital forces of a tropic race that they may regain health and strength. (Croly and Wakeman 1864: 19).

Similar language saturates the pamphlet. But what calls out in this particular passage is the reduction of whiteness to a yearning for what is absent, a feeling composed only of want, a hope oriented towards that which only its opposite can fill. The white subject, in other words, is a subject almost evacuated of subjectivity. In depicting whiteness as a soulless blank awaiting the revivifying juices of musical blackness (but not too many actual black people please, hence the specifically sexual excitement of just one black person to focus on, to get off with, and to keep on top of, that seems to animate musical miscegenators) Frere-Jones reproduces the deep context of miscegenation discourse. This is "musical miscegenation" not as "fact" but as useful fiction, one whose endurance occludes a more usable past for American pop.

Endnotes

1 Not all interlocutors were as engaged as the above. In the Internet peanut gallery, some weren't aware that their rock ever had much to do with black music, and simply didn't know what Frere-Jones was talking about (thus making his point).

2 Frere-Jones is far from the first writer to employ "miscegenation" and its derivative terms to describe American music. Andrew Ross writes of American music as "miscegenated cultural production" (1989: 68), and W.T. Lhamon characterizes its nineteenth century sources as containing "forms so miscegenated that they overwhelm the categorical names bequeathed them" (1998: 215).

3 It would take more space than is available to rehearse the etymology and significance of “amalgamation,” which, suffice to say, does possess an interesting relationship to “smelting pot” in that both refer to metallurgical technology. Amalgamation is the process of extracting a valuable mineral from ore by use of a catalytic agent. Why it came to be used as a racial metaphor in the 1830s is not clearly understood. My theory is that it was so adopted (and so adopted first in the northern “free” states then debating the consequence of small free black populations) because it captured the uneasy sense of a small, distinct population, entirely transforming a much larger body politic, for better or worse. That this metaphor operates quite differently from metaphors of the mixing and blending of diverse cultures and bloodlines should, I think, be made readily apparent by even this short sketch.

4 My argument, in other words, is historical rather than nominalist. I am not claiming that miscegenation didn’t exist before the word was coined, or that coining the word invented the phenomena of white supremacist societies worrying about the biopolitical consequences of human reproduction across color and caste lines. I am claiming that accounting for the way that different historical formations have sought to represent and control such human reproduction, which is really just another way of accounting for the long rise of biopolitics, cannot possibly be subsumed under a pseudo-scientific concept such as miscegenation.

5 More specific details on the original pamphlet controversy can be found in Bloch 1958 and Kaplan 1949.

6 Throughout I adopt the phrase “human reproduction” from feminist theory to avoid the naturalizing implications of sexual reproduction (or worse, biological reproduction). There are naturalizing implications in the word “human” as well, but it better captures the social and historical forces that reproduce and are reproduced by reproduction (Himmelweit 1991).

7 In an incensed speech, Representative Samuel Cox of Ohio read large portions of the pamphlet into the Congressional Record, the first political actor to make opposition to “miscegenation” an official plank of the backlash against black civil rights (Cox 1864).

8 For studies of how miscegenation was deployed legally and politically in the post-bellum period, see Palmer 1965 and Pascoe 1999.

9 Or so the authors tendentiously claimed. It is anachronistic to consider the Latin noun *genus* to mean “race” in its modern sense. See Hannaford 1996.

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