



The Burden of Racial Innocence: British-Invasion Rock Memoirs and the U.S. South

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Abstract

Mid-sixties British rock musicians have rationalized their firsthand experience and profitable interactions with American racial segregation by adopting a stance of racial innocence, or a belief that youth and virtue make one immune to charges of complicity with organized structures of racism. This almost childlike subject-positioning disingenuously separates musicians' expertise on African American blues from a more mature acknowledgement of the oppressive racial conditions that shaped the music, implicitly excluding them from culpability in the continued imbalance of power between black and white musicians.

Keywords: rock music, autobiography/memoir, race relations, U.S. South

In *The Mekons Rock and Roll*, their 1989 album critiquing the foundational myths of contemporary popular music, the Leeds, England post-punk collective The Mekons conjured a backward glimpse of U.S. racial politics as seen from the road in the song 'Amnesia': 'Eric Burdon, stunned in Mississippi/On the Animals' U.S. tour/ Mardi Gras Indians/Segregation, 1964!' These impressionistic lyrics denote several deep-seated contradictions brought to the surface by rock music's reinvigoration during the 1964 'British Invasion' of the United States: racial apartheid in the Land of the Free and the Home of the Blues, the prevailing customs of the U.S. South that denied African Americans equal protections guaranteed by the Constitution, the cultural expressions of marginalized, second-class citizens co-opted and re-presented as mass entertainment, and the appropriation and popularity of traditional black music performed by young white British groups. The specific scenes of modern American segregation and resulting sense of mute outrage referenced by The Mekons derive from Burdon's own memoir, *I Used to Be an Animal, but I'm All Right Now* (1986), later revised and expanded in a second volume, *Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood* (2001). In the context of his times, and within the larger body of British rock autobiography, the damning assessment of race in the United States by Burdon and several of his contemporaries in their memoirs takes on more complex dimensions when considering the blamelessness they assume in this charged dynamic when compartmentalizing stark acts of racism from more subtle incidents of cultural appropriation.

In her study *Racial Innocence*, historian Robin Bernstein analyzes how race in the United States has, in both obvious and undetected ways, been comprehended in tandem with childhood and its associations with immaculacy. Under segregation, white children were assumed to exist in a sinless, prelapsarian state, while children of color were innocent only so far as they obeyed and associated with white mentors dedicated to their moral redemption. In sentimental novels and plays, childhood, with its associations of purity and virtue, gave force to any race-based argument or position; progressivism and segregation alike were justified through the evocation of (white) childhood goodness as a mirror of the larger culture. As Bernstein traces it, popular fiction from the nineteenth century, from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus stories, established a dynamic where the sentimental depiction of pure-of-heart white children urging African Americans (children and adults alike) to be virtuous deflected the realistic representation of racial boundaries and inequality. In turn, people of color redeemed by the innocence of white youth become emblematic of a stable and justifiable

paternalistic system, their patience and absorbed goodness seen as proof of the racially divided society's inherent righteousness.

Given the power and predominance of the racial-innocence trope in American popular culture, it is worthwhile, then, to extrapolate its underlying concept beyond strict age limits. Taking such a liberty is necessary, given the importance of cross-racial interchange at the heart of American popular music. In *Morphology of the Folktale*, Vladimir Propp identifies a class of characters he terms 'donors', powerful, mystical figures who give a hero vital tools, often supernatural ones. In these symbolic stories, donors receive no tangible rewards for their favors, while the hero invariably meets a greater destiny. As they function in stories of cross-racial interchange told by white southern musicians, many African American donors pass on a gnomic understanding of musical traditions, where an innate grasp of musical excellence is shaped into fame and notoriety. The assumption that African Americans willingly donate their 'natural' musical skills animates autobiographies by white musicians going back to the high point of racial-innocence tales in the mid-nineteenth century, when white minstrels who donned blackface boasted of crossing race and class lines to learn songs and dances unknown in the dominant culture. Over time, these sketches portraying the origins of white imitative popular music reinforced racial and class hierarchies and sublated the contribution of African Americans to popular music in the name of sentimentality.

The life of nineteenth-century British stage actress Frances Anne 'Fanny' Kemble provides an important counterpoint to this master narrative. After marrying a wealthy Pennsylvanian after a successful U.S. tour in 1834, Kemble in her diaries evinces horror at the discovery her husband owns slaves on a Georgia plantation. Accustomed to genteel living, Kemble finds in the slaveholding South not only a more hardscrabble life but also the realities of being a slaveholder by proxy; her published diary balances sympathy for enslaved people and their mistreatment with a rampant self-justification, separating herself explicitly from the plantation complex, more implicitly from what she interprets as primitive expression in the music she hears from the fields and slave quarters. Kemble's residency in the South coincided with the normalization and domestication of interracial musical exchange; for example, enslaved African Americans sang traditional songs for whites in the course of their domestic labors while also picking up on European music at special events on the plantation (Floyd 58). As such, musicmaking became a form of adaptation, even survival. However, like many white listeners, Kemble assumed that the songs she heard sung by enslaved people were guileless, even pitiful imitations of European popular music, not a means of subtextual communication and

commiseration within a community. This misunderstanding manifested itself in the larger culture in the form of blackface minstrelsy, where the plight of African Americans was sentimentalized and trivialized at best, cruelly distorted at worst. Intertwined with the mawkish portrayal of African Americans in popular fiction and melodrama as long-suffering embodiments of morals, or what George Frederickson terms ‘romantic racialism’, whites’ mythopoeic attainment of African American musical skills became a galvanizing backstory as popular culture grew into hybridized forms.

A small but significant body of life writing by American blues and jazz musicians contributed to this fascination. Autobiographies by W.C. Handy (*Father of the Blues*, 1941) and Perry Bradford (*Born with the Blues*, 1965) chronicle the transformation of African American music from folk forms to a range of globally popular and profitable styles mass-mediated through sheet music and records. Louis Armstrong’s self-penned *Satchmo* (1952) and Sidney Bechet’s *Treat It Gentle* (1960) evoke vivid scenes of early twentieth-century New Orleans music, situated in the long-gone vice district of Storyville. More subtly, such works portrayed the slow dismantling of strict southern segregation through scenes of joyous musicmaking (see Stein). Bluesman Big Bill Broonzy dictated his own experiences in the Deep South with a fair amount of embellishment and folk humor to a Belgian amanuensis while on tour in Europe in the 1950s. Blurring the boundaries set by the color line, white musician Milton ‘Mezz’ Mezzrow’s *Really the Blues* (1946, co-written with Bernard Wolfe) became a favorite among young bohemians in the U.S. and Europe for its picaresque recounting of his career as a musician, marijuana dealer, and intimate of jazz greats like Armstrong. Each of these works contained tantalizing extramusical information about African American life left on the margins by more scholarly histories, or, as in the case of white conductor Paul Whiteman’s self-serving 1927 survey *Jazz*, left out completely. At the same time, these works largely sidestepped the reality that the blues developed as an oppositional form that defied systematic oppression; as a result, the South’s white power structure was rarely implicated directly, allowing readers to compartmentalize their love of African American music from their own racial attitudes. Ultimately, these texts complemented the musical canon and added to the mystique of the U.S. South for young listeners worldwide.

This mystique is marked by bold attempts from musicians outside the strict white/black racial binary to redraw the color line and assume identities and attitudes antithetical to mainstream American racial custom. For example, in *Really the Blues*, Mezzrow describes the transformative power of hearing New Orleans musicians like

Armstrong and Bechet and discovering a bohemian way of life in Harlem that stands in sharp contrast to his Russian immigrant/Jewish upbringing. Led by his attraction to jazz and vernacular culture and encouraged by hospitable Harlem residents (Mezzrow 185 et al.), Mezzrow relocates to the black enclave, marries an African American woman, and reemerges, in his own words, as a ‘voluntary Negro’ (Wald 20). At times, though, Mezzrow’s intentions to live in defiance of strict racial classification exhibits its own brand of romantic racialism in what Reva Marin terms ‘an essentialist reverence for black people and their culture’, a performative act that shapes his own self-presentation as an author (99). Before, during and after his assumption of a new identity, Mezzrow takes from his black donors. By the end of *Really the Blues*’s narrative, Mezzrow claims to have transfigured into the same black and Creole musicians he once admired from afar (322) and, against all laws of genetics, assumed the phenotypical traits of a black man simply through osmosis (390; Marin 100).

The career of California bandleader and producer Johnny Otis follows similar themes of affinity and a belief in fundamental racial transformation. Born of Greek lineage in 1921 as Ioannis Veliotes, Otis comes to identify himself as black not simply out of his love for rhythm and blues but from a sense that he embodies ‘the way of life, the special vitality of the black community [...] popularly known as “soul”’ (Otis xl). This intuition of ‘soul’, made up of unwritten cultural knowledge unrecognized or suppressed by hegemonic forces, gives Otis an identity that he believes supersedes his born ethnicity and inherited culture. In contrast to the acquisitive nature of blackface minstrelsy or the unspoken custom of light-skinned blacks ‘passing for white’ in secret to get ahead in America, Otis openly states his intention to remake himself and challenge essentialism. Forced into a racial binary by Jim Crow America, Otis elects to be perceived as black (Otis 12). Like Mezzrow before him, Otis willingly exposes himself to second-class citizenship in a segregated society. While Norman Mailer’s ‘White Negro’ archetype, outlined in a controversial 1957 essay, could conceivably partake of black culture as a temporary pose of rebellion or an escape valve from mid-century conformity, both Mezzrow and Otis narrate their life stories as heroic journeys to realize an authentic self amid racial and social hypocrisy. While they take astonishing liberties by presuming a new ethnic identity is theirs for the taking, as autobiographical subjects, both Mezzrow and Otis reveal themselves to be much less innocent of American racism than the nineteenth-century blackface minstrel or the mid-20th-century white ‘hipster’ aficionado of black culture.

Whether written on one side of the color line or, in the case of Mezzrow and Otis, narrating the passage from one side to the other, American musical autobiographies reckon with race in heavily stylized prose written for an audience that accepts a measure of racial-innocence fantasy alongside fact. As Daniel Stein and Martin Butler have observed, popular-music autobiographies occupy a tenuous position between strict factuality and a more subjective narrative truth. Similar to many patients undergoing psychoanalysis, autobiographers frequently misremember or even fabricate past events to reinforce a predetermined narrative arc or conclusion to their life story (see Spence). The collaborative act between subject and co-author and the need for a published work to conform within the boundaries of a musician's existing persona often skew a work's integrity. Overwhelmingly made up of 'as-told-to' productions or (as in the case of Louis Armstrong's *Swing That Music* [1936] and Billie Holiday's *Lady Sings the Blues* [1956]), ghostwritten and/or fabricated works, musicians' autobiographies frequently violate the terms of Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact and blur the lines between musician, subject, and author. While Stein and Butler conclude that musicians' autobiographies seek 'a sense of autonomy and respectability', they are also notable for being largely relational (117). While few autobiographies completely resist the impulse to use the medium as a self-promotional tool, musicians have consistently given credit to their early artistic inspirations in their narratives, describing both initial exposure to their music and subsequent personal encounters in detail. This intergenerational connection is often reinforced through paratext, as dedications and photographs recast musical celebrities as fans, paying homage to their influences.

The connection between African American blues artists and British musicians who came of age in the 1950s and achieved fame in the 1960s offers one example of this identification, shaped by both affinity and difference. As Glenn C. Altschuler and others have demonstrated, early rock and roll's popularity in America was inextricable from the emergence in the 1950s of the teenager as both a sociological phenomenon and a market force. The hegemony of popular taste shifted to accommodate adolescents and their growing buying power. Meanwhile, the realities of Britain's postwar economy, marked by the rationing of consumer goods, contrasted sharply with media images of American abundance. As a result, young Britons absorbed U.S. popular culture mostly through osmosis or an outright projection of their own desires. The postwar generation in the U.K., Nicholas Schaffner writes, was

the first generation to grow up under the shadow of America, whose real and fancied trappings—gangster films, Coca-Cola, big fast cars, blue jeans, and above all rock & roll—exuded an irresistible mystique. It was this obsession with America that caused the future legions of the British Invasion...to reinvent America as a rock & roll fantasy world (10).

The presence of American servicemen in cities like Liverpool and Newcastle after the war added to a sense of allyship and common feeling, while the relative obscurity of many rhythm-and-blues and blues records, infrequently heard through outlets like Radio Luxembourg and Armed Forces Radio and discs imported via mail-order from the States, made them desirable objects of near-cult worship to the young British cognoscenti.

Much of what these listeners responded to in these records was ‘soul’, the transcendent spiritual quality derived from African American ecstatic religious practices and the experience of overcoming enslavement and discrimination, the same liberatory spirit invoked by Johnny Otis when explaining his crossover into black culture. Historian William L. Van Deburg writes,

If there was a black American mystique, soul provided much of its aura of sly confidence and assumed superiority. Soul was sass—a type of primal spiritual energy and passionate joy available to members of the exclusive racial confraternity (73).

Soul music blended the jubilant performance style of gospel with more secular (and marketable) themes. By the 1960s, soul had become not only a category for African American music but a commodity, distributed on records by labels like Detroit’s Motown and Tamla and Memphis’s Stax, and profitable on both sides of the Atlantic. ‘The meaning [of soul] would become hotly contested in the years to come’, music critic Jon Savage summarizes,

but in the mid-sixties it served as a catch-all term for everything that made black music different, that recognized its emotional and kinetic power and its intimate relation to a people’s life just as things appeared to be changing for the better. [...] It was urban, confident, two generations away from the plantations. It symbolized moving on up (248).

This impulse toward upward mobility and self-determination resonated with young British musicians ready to break from the restrictions of economic austerity, the prevailing class system, the authority of the World War II generation and the blandness of mainstream pop music.

Between the lines, autobiographies by British musicians who came of age in the late Fifties and early Sixties reveal a flawed assumption that African Americans' 'soulful' music was not fashioned within the crucible of race but was instead purely instinctive, almost too simple for whites to adapt and master. In his autobiography, Pete Townshend of The Who recalls that learning to play in imitation of his rhythm and blues favorites meant

you didn't have to be fast or clever [...] You had to be prepared to really listen, and ultimately really feel the music. This seemed less absurd for a young middle-class white boy in 1963 than it does today, so I proceeded without difficulty to learn to play the blues... (57).

Townshend contrasts the pure and easy nature of learning the blues as a young man with his simultaneous tribulations of being a student at art college and, though he acknowledges some inherent race and class incongruities, finds little challenge in playing such 'natural' music and, in his state of racial innocence, expresses no internal doubts about appropriating African American style.

Likewise, in his memoir *Americana* (2013), Ray Davies of The Kinks delineates his own suspended state of racial innocence. Growing up working-class in postwar north London, Davies associates the blues as part of a larger, undifferentiated U.S. popular culture that encompasses cowboy movies, science fiction, and the outrageous latter-day minstrelsy of the *Amos and Andy* television show. However, '[b]y the time the Kinks did their first U.S. tour, in the mid-'60s', Davies writes, 'it was apparent that America was a vastly different place compared to the one I imagined in my youth', citing 'racial tension' as a particular source of disillusionment (44). How the adult Davies was unaware of U.S. racism is never fully explained, and hard to fully understand, given his attraction to African American music from the South whose lyrics expressed, albeit often in coded terms, dissatisfaction with the racial status quo.

Perhaps the British Invasion's premier bluesman, Eric Clapton similarly compartmentalizes the music he admires from musicians' lived experience in his 2007 memoir. First apprehending African American blues as a boy via a rare airing on the BBC, Clapton recalls the visceral thrill of the music, leading him to intense

study of the guitar. While gaining proficiency of the music, Clapton neatly separates the blues' musical content from the hard life its lyrics reveal. 'I had never really understood, or been affected by, racial conflict', Clapton writes. 'When I listened to music I was fairly disinterested in where the players came from, or what color their skin was' (94). For Clapton, learning the blues means mastering the style until it resembles what he believes is its untutored, 'natural' state, believing 'there is something primitively soothing about this music' (33). On the one hand, the young musician appreciates the lack of pretension and ornamentation in the music (much as Fanny Kemble did with African American field songs a century earlier), yet on the other hand, Clapton's unambiguous reference to 'the primitive' suggests an assumption that the blues lacks sophistication in relation to European-derived music.

Unlike American contemporaries, such as Mike Bloomfield and Taj Mahal, who penned accounts in their memoirs of meeting blues legends one-on-one during their apprenticeship, Clapton learns the music an ocean away from its source, using records as his guide. Simultaneously, Clapton absorbs the mythology surrounding enigmatic blues artists like the late Robert Johnson, giving his study of the music almost occultist overtones. When the early 1960s blues-music boom brings African American musicians to British shores, Clapton and his contemporaries approach them as innocents, seemingly unconcerned about their idols' experiences as second-class citizens in their home country. Hired to back up Mississippi-born harmonica player Sonny Boy Williamson (Rice Miller), Clapton and his bandmates in The Yardbirds find no common ground with their elder outside of music, in large part because of their lack of curiosity about his personal history. Between the lines, Clapton's narration strikes a rueful tone, implying that Williamson, with his decades of performing experience, did not musically or personally defer to The Yardbirds or treat them as peers and equals, both naïve assumptions Clapton made in his early twenties.

Touring the United States with his power trio Cream in the politically fraught year of 1968, Clapton blithely admits, 'I was deliberately oblivious to it all, taking no interest in what was happening' (94). Such apathy towards racial politics also distinguishes his descriptions of American blues musicians/donors he does befriend, such as Muddy Waters and B.B. King, who are portrayed in short vignettes outside the main autobiographical narrative. Though intended as a show of post-racial 'colorblindness', Clapton's disjointed messaging regarding black musicians illustrates how young British acolytes selectively interpreted the blues, ahistorically

picking up on its aesthetics and ‘outsider’ status while sloughing off the ongoing, thorny realities of race at its essence.

One of Clapton’s earliest American influences, Big Bill Broonzy, embodies many of the contradictions of the African American performer in Europe in the late 1950s and early 1960s, most starkly in the book that bears his name, 1955’s *Big Bill Blues*. The book’s methodology betrays many of its intentions. In his foreword, Broonzy’s amanuensis Yannick Bruynoghe admits that he used no tape recording or strict transcription methods when talking with his subject. Bruynoghe freely applied what he terms ‘modifications’ to Broonzy’s story, with the understanding that the musician is a ‘modern fabulist’ not bound by historical accuracy (9). Aided by liquor, the two men collaborate on a volume animated more by general narrative truth than adherence to verifiable facts. Yet, for all its suggestions of intimate, affable truth-telling, Broonzy and Bruynoghe’s book represents a self-conscious authorial performance, in congruence with Broonzy’s chosen performative style as a musician. As blues historian Paul Garon comments, the book supplemented Broonzy’s contemporaneous attempts as an expatriate to rebrand himself as a more ‘down-home’ folk performer to credulous European audiences than the modern, jazz-influenced musician he truly was.

However, *Big Bill Blues* remains an essential blues text for its mode of collaborative double-voiced discourse. While Broonzy—filtered through his amanuensis—appears on the surface an avuncular narrator and good-natured traveler, the narrative incorporates hard lessons gathered as an African American man in the segregated South. In relating stories of his once-enslaved parents, his musical contemporaries, and his own hard labor in the cotton fields, the coal mines, and the rail yards, Broonzy speaks to the racial exploitation that both informs the blues and is temporarily relieved by the music. By eschewing direct commentary on racial injustice and instead letting the transcribed lyrics of his songs ‘When Will I Get to Be Called a Man’ and ‘Black, Brown, and White’ speak for themselves, Broonzy strictly divides his authorial and musical personas from his lived experience, in keeping with his implied readers’ expectations.

Like Broonzy, bluesman Muddy Waters reverted to a more basic ‘country blues’ style when performing in the U.S. and England in the early 1960s to appeal to youth enraptured by the folk-music revival. Few African American musicians were held in higher esteem by British rock musicians than Waters, born McKinley Morganfield in 1915 in rural Mississippi. While working as a sharecropper at Stovall Plantation, Waters was first recorded in 1941 by folklorist Alan Lomax, who heard echoes of Robert Johnson and Son House in his playing and singing. Waters moved north to

Chicago a few years later as part of the Great Migration, signing to Chess Records and adopting a more contemporary look and sound, complete with an electric band. Waters's Chess recordings found favor with English audiences and led to his first British tour in 1958. Though Waters had to recalibrate his style for audiences more attuned to folk music or 'trad' jazz, he drew key young acolytes in the U.K.: Eric Burdon and John Steel formed The Animals after attending a Waters show in Newcastle, while in London the fledgling Rolling Stones took their name (and an identity separate from their 'beat group' contemporaries) from a Waters song title (Gordon 163). Yet young Britons did not adopt Mississippi blues *en masse* from the source. For example, *Melody Maker* panned the first Rolling Stones show in July 1962 as 'well-meaning but interminable songs about share croppers' [*sic*] (Cohen 46). The band may have taken this as a compliment and a marker of their authenticity.

In his punctilious memoir of the band's career in the Sixties, Rolling Stones bassist Bill Wyman registers the excitement he and his bandmates felt on their first tour of the United States in 1964. While in Chicago, the band arranges to record at Chess Records' studio, in imitation of their African American idols. As Wyman reports, 'we were flabbergasted to see the great Muddy Waters himself. We were even more shaken when he proceeded to help us carry in our guitars. Stunned, we recorded all afternoon and evening and finished at midnight' (228). As Wyman, the band's first memoirist and acknowledged institutional memory, reports it, the unexpected sighting of Waters makes their success in America all the more surreal. Upon their pilgrimage to record at a studio that had achieved mythic status in their minds, the Rolling Stones chance upon their hero, who, in congruence with the 'donor' folktale trope, offers them both a hand and his tacit encouragement in exchange for their kind patronage.

The story of the band's meeting with Waters took on greater, more mythical proportions as the bluesman arguably became better known as a 'roots' musician with an influence on rock than for his own formidable recordings and performances. In his autobiography *Life* (2010), Rolling Stones guitarist and chief blues aficionado Keith Richards notes, with no small measure of pride, that he and his band were 'unpaid promoters for Chicago blues', only accidentally successful in the pop market (109). Richards's own memory of his band's first meeting with Waters extends this claim into the realms of imagination. Seemingly alone among those present, Richards recalls the scene at the Chess studio as 'this guy in black overalls painting the ceiling. And it's Muddy Waters, and he's got whitewash streaming down his face and he's on top of a ladder' (158). Richards makes the assumption that Waters must have been doing manual labor to earn his keep at the record label during a

period of declining sales. (Not so coincidentally, Richards insists Waters's commercial fortunes would improve after his association with The Rolling Stones. [161]) The pathos of the whitewash staining the laboring black man's face adds a surreal touch, echoing a similar image from Ralph Ellison's fictional first-person tale *Invisible Man*.

For all its fanciful elements, Richards's recollection reads as much as an expression of racial innocence as Wyman's. As Waters's young champions/apprentices, Richards and his bandmates look on with pity at their humbled hero in an all-too-ordinary situation, with the recording studio transformed into a latter-day plantation. In this tableau, the popular-music industry enforces perpetual labor in addition to musicmaking and alienates African American cultural workers from the means of production. Richards's vignette makes no mention of his band's direct musical debt to Waters or suggests that British rock and roll was a more palatable version of black southern blues for a segregated United States, and that bands like The Rolling Stones inadvertently and indirectly profited from Jim Crow. As Eric Lott has delineated in his landmark study of nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy, *Love and Theft*, an 'innocent' appreciation by more successful white imitators for original African American performance historically suffices as payment in full for their cultural borrowings.

Unsurprisingly, historians have found little basis in fact for Richards's story. Muddy Waters's biographer Robert Gordon quotes informants who avow that Waters was too proud and too fastidious in his appearance to be seen painting the recording studio. Rolling Stones chronicler Rich Cohen concurs, but under the condition that while the facts may not hold up, the story reads as 'symbolically true', and deserves documentation, a revealing marker of the prizing of narrative truth in popular autobiography (115).

More significant than this one contested anecdote is the uniformity of opinion regarding The Rolling Stones' initial exposure to Southern segregation. Cohen's history of the group records a sense of incomprehension and shock during their first tour of the States in 1964, quoting Mick Jagger:

[W]e found it the most repressive society. Very prejudiced. In every way there was still segregation. And the attitudes were fantastically old-fashioned. Americans shocked me by their behavior and narrow-mindedness (113).

Of course, the band and their contemporaries were very young, inexperienced men at the time, still growing in sophistication and understanding, with their knowledge

of the South shaped by media, particularly blues, soul and gospel recordings. Yet those same recordings reverberated with echoes of racial tension, past and present. The blues especially evoked a South completely opposite than that of the cliché of a peaceful, pastoral Dixie, enrapturing young listeners looking for an alternative to anodyne popular music. How bands like The Rolling Stones could amass recordings and study black music for years before arriving in the United States yet still register a complete bafflement vis-à-vis racism reflects a clinging to racial innocence prevalent among British musicians in the 1960s.

A similar divide between music and politics characterizes Eric Burdon's memoirs of the era, *I Used to Be an Animal, but I'm All Right Now* (1986) and *Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood* (2001). In the introduction to *I Used to Be an Animal*, the rock star preemptively admits to errors of fact in his remembrances. In the Sixties, he writes, 'I did not keep a diary. Most of what you are about to read are memories, dreams, feelings and even hallucinations, but that's rock and roll' (1). Befitting this hallucinogenic subjectivity, Burdon declares that he has lived out a virtual dream, a 'rock 'n' roll fantasy' (1). The stuff of that dream, he maintains, derives from the history and labors of Africans in the diaspora, centralized in the American South. 'Over the years', Burdon summarizes, 'white men have turned [black music] into a multi-million-dollar business, as vast and as complex as any other business in the world today' (1). Ultimately, Burdon claims kinship in his preface with African American musicians in their struggle with an exploitative, white-owned industry.

Born and raised in Newcastle, Burdon recalls post-World War II austerity in bleak terms, with few material or emotional comforts. This sense of 'blues' affect finds its expressive counterpart in African American music. As a teenager, Burdon earns local fame imitating the vocal stylings of rhythm-and-blues artists like Ray Charles and Jimmy Witherspoon. After forming The Animals, he quickly develops from being a starstruck fan of his African American idols to assuming a role as a peer, if not brother, akin to how Mezz Mezzrow and Johnny Otis each identified themselves as a 'voluntary Negro' to exclude themselves from white society and to live and play music among African Americans. Burdon's account paints 1964 New York City in glittering terms, depicting the city as a beacon of artistic democracy and brotherhood, with porous boundaries between lower Manhattan and Harlem, between staid old showplaces for pop acts like the Paramount Theater and the more 'soulful' environs of the Apollo Theater uptown.

By contrast, The Animals' first national tour of the States is marred by an encounter with the Ku Klux Klan in Memphis, Tennessee and run-ins with racists in Mississippi. Retrospectively scolding himself for waving a Confederate flag in the

heart of Dixie and making a Klansman hood out of a pillowcase to play a cruel prank on the band's African American roadie, Burdon concludes, 'I was only just waking up to what racial prejudice was really all about, and what it meant and how little we really knew about such things' (93). Such circumspection frames an adjacent scene (likely the one referenced by The Mekons' 'Amnesia' years later) where The Animals insist that their roadie be allowed accommodation in a segregated Mississippi motel. Without much supporting evidence, Burdon boasts, 'We broke down the doors. We actually integrated the first motel in Mississippi, probably in the whole of the South, before the laws had been changed' (95). While Burdon's grasp of facts may be suspect, he nevertheless reveals the mixture of emotions young English R&B devotees felt in their whirlwind tours of the United States. In Burdon's case, his subject positioning regarding African Americans goes from idolatry and imitation to innocent outrage to an attenuated form of friendship that Burdon superimposes as civil-rights activism.

In his 2001 sequel, Burdon and his co-author largely confine issues of race to discrete chapters, as if the issue of cultural borrowing is extricable from rock-music history and southern-style segregation was simply part of the mosaic of the 'far-out' turbulent Sixties. Revisiting his working-class boyhood in Newcastle, Burdon finds commiseration in the blues as well as an opportunity for his own self-expression. Burdon writes,

America's black music had become the new secret underground teen language. It seemed to us the best of American culture, and though Americans seemed determined to ignore or discard it, we were happy to pick it up, dust it off, shine it, and give it a new twist (14).

Soon, Burdon and his bandmates in The Animals are backing the likes of Sonny Boy Williamson and witnessing a microcosm of Southern racial conflict in a backstage fracas between Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis. Unlike Wyman and Richards, however, Burdon does not characterize his blues idols as immediately subservient to young whites, and becomes aware of the effects left on them by racism.

Yet Burdon's racial awareness is tempered by his own lapses into racial innocence. Entranced by the music, Burdon asserts he became an autodidact on the land where the blues began. But despite his claim that he 'read a lot about the history of the American South' before The Animals' first U.S. tour, his account registers a disingenuous bewilderment at seeing segregation in the flesh. Burdon expresses amazement that primary sites of American roots music like Memphis and

New Orleans still imposed strict segregation in the Sixties, relegating African Americans to second-class status. Burdon's account of the tour teems with images of corrupt white-supremacist law enforcement, unreconstructed 'redneck' white Southerners, and Ku Klux Klan parades. In an updating of a scene from his previous autobiography, Burdon defies segregation and insists upon hotel accommodations in Mississippi for the band's African American roadie, now identified as 'Sonny' (no last name given). Not acting out of a learned understanding of Southern mores or the social-justice principles that motivated American college students campaigning for desegregation in the South that year of 'Freedom Summer', Burdon seems to confront Jim Crow as more an act of youthful rebellion against an outmoded, oppressive system. His prior knowledge of the blues, it seems, imbues him primarily with romantic racialism, a sentiment quite separate (and unequal) from reality in the neo-Confederate South.

Burdon's bold claim to a hybrid identity of working-class British and Southern African American characteristics and his assumption of innate 'soul' complicate his pronouncements on race. Like The Rolling Stones in their stylized Muddy Waters tales, Burdon conveys his initial meetings with his African American inspirations in startlingly simplistic terms, assuming these cordial encounters represent a benediction and blessing on the part of his elders. Even when confronted by the short-tempered Nina Simone for his cover of her song 'Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood', Burdon by his own account imperiously chastens her about her own musical borrowings and the two become friends. In this vein, Burdon writes unhesitatingly about his close personal identification with people of color:

The American black experience has always been fascinating to me. [...] I developed an early reputation for having a lot of black friends, particularly displaced Africans in Newcastle [...] I saw what freedom meant to those exiles and it engendered an even deeper interest in the African experience in America, resulting in a reputation that preceded me to America (55).

Imagining his American sojourns as a similar type of exile, Burdon takes as a compliment the derisive term 'White Negro', the neologism borrowed from Norman Mailer, to seal his innocent connections with black performers.

At the height of his popularity, Burdon made his bid for White Negrodism in a 1966 essay for the African American newsmagazine *Ebony*. In his introduction, Burdon proclaims, 'I am English and white and proud of it, being English that is. Forget the white bit' ('An Animal' 161). Burdon then audaciously explains to the

magazine's readership the evolution of black music, the state of 'separate but equal' in the pop-music business, and the appeal of veteran performers like Ray Charles and Nina Simone, who he compares to a 'black panther'. Drawing upon his experiences on tour, Burdon is equally unabashed about explaining American racial prejudice to black readers, writing that

through these associations [with African American musicians] I soon learned [...] that these people were being treated as something different from the rest of their population in their homeland because they were a different color [...] I think because I am white and from another country I often learn a lot more about prejudice in some ways than a lot of Negroes (168).

Here, Burdon's seemingly guileless affinity for black musicians and his connoisseurship of blues and soul bleeds over into oversimplification and condescension. Burdon assumes a special type of privilege when interpreting racism from an outsider's perspective for the benefit of *Ebony's* audience, taking the naïve view that 'a different color' explains centuries of systematic oppression and violence, with its roots in European colonialism. To underscore Burdon's sense of identification with African Americans, the essay's accompanying photographs depict the singer in New York City alongside bluesman John Lee Hooker, The Animals' producer Tom Wilson and among a group of young white fans (including the future Linda McCartney) conspicuously traveling uptown to Harlem to attend shows at the Apollo Theater and a subterranean jazz club. Emphasizing his own racial innocence, Burdon conflates his patronage of black music with an assumption of deeper identification with its subculture and the permission to speak on behalf of black Americans.

Burdon's projections of black urban life instigated a response by African Americans with their own first-person anecdotes. Not all of *Ebony's* readers were convinced that Burdon had in good faith exposed the problem of race in the U.S. One letter to the editor questioned the extent of Burdon's assumed solidarity with African Americans: 'I suppose he thinks it's fun to be kicked in the face, bitten by dogs, spat upon, cursed at, and have all these nice 'soulful' times [...] the blues come from real suffering, and we're still doing that' ('Letters'). Another reader gave credit to the singer for his 'thought-provoking and humorous' take, while conceding that 'maybe he did lay it on too thick when glorifying the "down-home" singers [...] and "brotherhood among Negroes"' ('Letters'). If the published letters convey a fair sampling of the response to Burdon's article, it appeared that black America

appreciated the singer's recognition of white America's racism but were also attuned to his lapses into paternalism and simplistic moralizing. Like his British Invasion counterparts, Burdon employs the liminal, privileged position of the tourist within another country's black enclaves to make sweeping generalizations about race relations, excluding himself from his harshest judgments.

Burdon's attempted exposé of race in America echoed the conclusions of contemporaneous works by white authors like John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* (1961) and Robert Penn Warren's *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (1965), which used first-person reportage on Southern racism to urge gradualism on civil rights. Such assessments contrasted with *The Fire Next Time* (1963), James Baldwin's extended essay on race relations, which situated music as a site of cultural misunderstanding and appropriation. 'In jazz and especially in the blues', Baldwin writes,

there is something tart and ironic, authoritative, and double-edged. White Americans seem to feel that happy songs are *happy* and sad songs are *sad*, and that, God help us, is exactly the way that most white Americans sing them—sounding, in both cases, so helplessly, defensively fatuous that one dare not speculate on the temperature of the deep freeze from which issue their brave and sexless little voices (55–56).

In Baldwin's characterizations, the U.S.'s culture industry strictly segregates and categorizes popular music by style and format so as not to confuse the mass audience with music (like authentic jazz and blues) articulating conflicted emotions and idiosyncratic affect. (Big Bill Broonzy's sly 'protest' music about mistreatment in the South stands as a case in point, as it resonated largely on different frequencies to black and white audiences.) In the period between 1960 and 1964, rock and roll music had become largely disempowered, replaced by sterile, assembly-line pop productions that put fresh-scrubbed personalities (with the 'sexless little voices' Baldwin despised) out front, robbing the music of its former danger and subjectivity. Baldwin's withering assessment turns the trope of white racial innocence inside out, revealing in his view a lack of experience—musical, sexual, and otherwise—that invalidates the music and supports the status quo.

Read in light of Baldwin's excoriating critique, the British Invasion represents musical reinvention alongside a rebirth of candid racial innocence. By the late 1960s, white patronage of black music had become unexceptional, needing no justifying narrative, while African American intellectuals like Baldwin, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), and Stokely Carmichael made their dissatisfaction with young whites'

patronization clear. Recalling their firsthand introductions to the segregated United States, Clapton, Richards, Burdon and their cohort harbor the expectation (or the subtle demand) that their black musical donors selflessly see past obvious differences in ethnicity, nationality, and privilege to recognize British blues adepts as their adopted kin and also redeemer figures, an expression of romantic racialism that had become largely passé among many of their white American contemporaries (Frederickson 328). When confronted with irrefutable evidence of racism, the Englishmen's dumbfounded state of confusion invokes tropes of naïveté and offended purity reminiscent of nineteenth-century sentimental writing. This almost childlike subject-positioning disingenuously separates the English musician's expertise on the blues from a more mature acknowledgement of the oppressive racial conditions that shaped the music, implicitly excluding him from culpability in the continued exploitation or devaluation of black musicians. This narrative performativity allows performers/authors to have it both ways: they may simultaneously present themselves to readers as guileless 'soul brothers' to their oppressed musical kin, rather than opportunistic interlopers, and outraged critics of Jim Crow segregation. In both cases, understating their awareness of southern segregation before and after the fact bolsters their claim to musical and personal authenticity. To re-appropriate an Animals lyric, originally taken from Nina Simone, being a 'soul whose intentions are good' (Animals) frees one from being fully conscious of racism's history, resulting in a blissful racial amnesia.

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