

# **MESSAGE IN THE MUSIC: POLITICAL COMMENTARY IN BLACK POPULAR MUSIC FROM RHYTHM AND BLUES TO EARLY HIP HOP**

**James B. Stewart**

"Music is a powerful tool in the form of communication [that] can be used to assist in organizing communities."

Gil Scott-Heron (1979)

This essay examines the content of political commentaries in the lyrics of Rhythm and Blues (R & B) songs. It utilizes a broad definition of R & B that includes sub-genres such as Funk and "Psychedelic Soul." The investigation is intended, in part, to address persisting misinterpretations of the manner in which R & B influenced listeners' political engagement during the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement. The content of the messages in R & B lyrics is deconstructed to enable a fuller appreciation of how the creativity and imagery associated with the lyrics facilitated listeners' personal and collective political awareness and engagement. The broader objective of the essay is to establish a foundation for understanding the historical precedents and political implications of the music and lyrics of Hip Hop.

For present purposes, political commentary is understood to consist of explicit or implicit descriptions or assessments of the social, economic, and political conditions of people of African descent, as well as the forces creating these conditions. These criteria deliberately exclude most R & B compositions because the vast majority of songs in this genre, similar to the Blues, focus on some aspect of male-female relationships.<sup>1</sup> This is not meant to imply that music examining male-female relationships is devoid of political implications; however, attention is restricted here to lyrics that address directly the relationship of African Americans to the larger American body politic. While a number of commentators have discussed selected aspects of political ideas found in R & B lyrics, the main corpus of this political commentary has not been subjected to systematic analysis.<sup>2</sup>

Historical precedents and theoretical perspectives underlying the present inquiry are discussed in the next section. A typology of commentary types is then presented and used to examine selected political commentary in R & B lyrics from the 1960s through the early 1980s. The concluding section briefly considers the extent to which the typology is useful for understanding political commentary in Hip Hop music.

## HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

There are a variety of classical and more contemporary commentaries about the role of music in African American culture that provide useful insights for the development of a framework for understanding the political role of R & B. Early 20th century perspectives advanced by Zora Neale Hurston, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Alain Locke remain relevant for interpreting contemporary African American musical forms. Hurston insisted that African American folklore was the core component of authentic African American culture.<sup>3</sup> Extending this idea, the most authentic political commentary in music lyrics should originate in the organic everyday experiences of people of African descent. In *The Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois maintained that the "sorrow songs" provided one of the most useful documentations of the long history of oppression and struggle against that oppression.<sup>4</sup> Thus, this form of music became a bearer of historical memory, similar to the role of griots in many West African societies. In addition to the sorrow conveyed in these songs, Du Bois argued that there was also a "faith in the ultimate justice of things" and that "minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence."<sup>5</sup> Similar shifts in moods and assessments can be observed in R & B lyrics.

Philosopher Alain Locke went even further than Du Bois by proposing that changes in predominant African-American musical genres were closely correlated with major transformations in the sociopolitical and economic milieu for African Americans.<sup>6</sup> Locke's views suggest that in the absence of external efforts to shape the content of African American music, changes in lyrical content should be correlated with changes in the social, political, and economic circumstances for African Americans. Moreover, Locke emphasized that African American music was deeply ingrained in the American cultural fabric to the point that it "furnish[es] the sub-soil of our national music."<sup>7</sup> Locke's perspective suggests the need to explore political commentary in black music in terms of not only its impact on African Americans, but also on Americans of European and Asian descent.

Some contemporary commentators echo many of the classical positions about the special role of music in African American life and culture. Samuel Floyd asserts that "all black music making is driven by and permeated with the memory of things from the cultural past and that the viability of such memory should play a role in the perception of and criticism of works and performances of black music."<sup>8</sup> Applying this concept to a sub-genre of R & B, historian William Van Deburg argued that, "as an indigenous expression of the collective African American experience, [Soul music] served as a repository of racial consciousness [that transcended] the medium of entertainment [and] provided a ritual in song with which African Americans could identify and through which they could convey important in-group symbols."<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, disc jockey Reggie Lavong declared, "like Blues,

Soul music reflects, defines, and directs the strategies, expectations, and aspirations of black Americans."<sup>10</sup>

These claims about the political efficacy of R & B have been challenged by Brian Ward in *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* who argued that, "on its own Rhythm and Blues had never made mass political or social action possible, or even likely, in any direct or simple way." According to Ward, R & B "had always navigated the territory between being a cultural expression of a black insurgency, which was organized by other means and essentially shaped by other intellectual, political, and socio-economic forces; and being a surrogate for such action."<sup>11</sup> While resolution of this controversy is beyond the scope of this investigation, the debate signals the need to ground the current exploration in an interpretation of the general role of music as an influence on individual and collective human behavior.

Some anthropologists argue that music played a functional role in early human development by facilitating transmission and retention of information necessary for individual and group survival. This is accomplished, in part, through the phenomenon of "auditory imagery." Auditory imagery occurs when one has a "song on the brain," that is, one has the experience of hearing the song without auditory stimulation. A study by David Kraemer and others, examining how the brain processes music, found that similar to previous research regarding "visual imagery," auditory imagery is triggered when an individual is familiar with a song. When subjects heard a version of a song with some lyrics missing, the brain involuntarily supplied the missing words. Moreover, the researchers found that this imaging occurred in a specific part of the brain that was not accessed when subjects were not familiar with a song.<sup>12</sup>

In a broader sense, audio and visual imagery induced by music enables listeners to access related memories, an idea used by Samuel Floyd to ground his study *The Power of Black Music*. Floyd argued that "our responses to music are based on our reactions to the artistic embodiment of struggle and fulfillment as depicted in contrived events, relationships, refinements, and idealizations." These constructed scenarios represent analogs to the daily human struggles to achieve balance between what he describes as "various manifestations of tension and repose, including opposition and accommodation, aspiration and hope, and failure and achievement."<sup>13</sup>

The likelihood that listeners supply corroborative content to elaborate on the political messages in music is acknowledged by Ward, who reported that "with relatively few Soul songs and even fewer Soul singers openly embracing the organized struggle during the decades after Montgomery, black audiences sometimes found themselves bestowing political meanings and Movement messages on ostensibly apolitical songs . . . and [that] sometimes involved popular readings of songs which were far removed from the original intentions of those who made the music."<sup>14</sup> One of the thrusts of this investigation is to document the wide variety of political messages available to audiences in using

R & B as a vehicle for their personal and collective political affirmations and empowerment.

Ward's dismissal of the political potency of R & B lyrics stems in part from his emphasis on what he perceives as the limited personal involvement of R & B artists in the Civil Rights Movement, the intensifying commodification of the music over time, and the progressive disappearance of radio stations committed to political education and community development that provided outlets for songs with political messages.<sup>15</sup> There is no question that in a world in which black popular music is highly commodified there is no guarantee that lyrical content mirrors the realities existing within the communities from which writers and performers originate. As black music becomes increasingly subject to control by corporate interests seeking to maximize profits, both its organic linkage to community well-being and its sensibilities are weakened, particularly if the controlling financial interests are external to the social orbit of the music's core black constituency. Marc Anthony Neal cautions in *Songs in the Key of Black Life* that one of the principal constraints placed on black radio during the era of "hyperconglomeration" is on "the music that gets played—or, rather, the music that is *never* played on commercial radio stations that specialize in so-called urban formats."<sup>16</sup>

It is also important to recognize that new technologies have significantly reduced the effectiveness of political messages traditionally disseminated through audio recording formats. The music video, for example, has much greater potential than audio recordings to impact the listener's conscious through the combination of auditory and visual imagery. However, the dissemination of political messages through this format is even less likely than with audio recordings due to even stricter control by corporate commercial interests and associated efforts to expand markets for visual media.

As noted by Floyd, the transformation of R & B "into a racially integrated music with African Americans and whites claiming it as their own began in the 1940s" and accelerated with the ascendance of Little Richard and Chuck Berry.<sup>17</sup> The interracial audience of R & B raises the issue of how political messages available to any listener can be shaped in ways that target specific sub-groups. Some messages may be simultaneously intended for both black and non-black audiences. The two groups may interpret messages similarly or dissimilarly depending on the extent of the use of culturally-specific linguistic features and the degree to which conditions are perceived through comparable lenses. When writers and performers engage in intentional audience differentiation to communicate simultaneously with internal and external audiences, this reflects a modern variant of the type of double entendre reflected in many of the Spirituals sung during the era of slavery to promote resistance and provide guidance along the Underground Railroad, such as, "Swing Low Sweet Chariot."<sup>18</sup> In other cases political commentaries may be fashioned to target specific audiences. As an example, some integrationist commentaries are directed primarily to external, non-black audiences, such as

with the "crossover" phenomenon in popular music. In contrast, nationalist, anti-establishment, and revolutionary messages are typically shaped to promote internal community political mobilization.

In general, the impact of the lyrical content on the psyche or behavior of single or multiple audiences depends on several factors. These include the forcefulness, sophistication, and creativity of the message content; the efficacy of the style of delivery; and the perceived salience of the message. These elements, in turn, are heavily influenced by changes over time in the technologies of music production, dissemination, and consumption, along with the ever-evolving social-political landscape of race relations and inter-generational differences in musical tastes.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the stylistic conventions that define a particular genre will, of course, set the boundaries prescribing the format of any associated political commentaries. Moreover, the conditions and events specific to a given time period will heavily influence the subjects of political lyrics and will determine the target audiences as well as the content of the commentary.

Audience segmentation is also facilitated through differences in the sites where different subgroups experience music. Guthrie Ramsey introduces the concept of "community theaters," to describe "public and private spaces [that] provide audiences with a place to negotiate with others—in a highly social way—what cultural expressions such as music mean."<sup>20</sup> Before and during the Civil Rights–Black Power Movement, racial segregation demanded distinct spaces in which African Americans listened to and experienced music. These places included family gatherings, informal interactions among friends, parties, organizational meetings, and theaters in the community. These segregated community theaters facilitated the generation of group-specific interpretations of political messages.

The political saliency of R & B songs was further intensified by the efforts of some African American disc jockeys to use their shows as platforms for political education. Brian Ward has provided the most comprehensive account of the role of radio in the southern civil rights struggle. However, in analyzing these initiatives he fails to examine how the disc jockeys carefully selected particular songs to underscore the political messages delivered through other formats.<sup>21</sup> Northern disc jockeys had much greater latitude than their southern counterparts to intermingle narrative political commentary and the judicious play of songs with political messages.

The importance of these diversified community theaters cannot be overstated in gauging the impact of R & B on listeners' political awareness and engagement, but is easily overlooked when only commercial production and distribution channels are examined. This is the context in which Van Deburg maintained that "more overtly political music often made little impact on national record charts, [but] the message of these songs was spread underground via a modern-day 'grapevine telegraph'."<sup>22</sup> As will be demonstrated in subsequent sections, the wide variety of message content in R & B lyrics provided rich ingredients for robust political discussion.

## TOWARD A TYPOLOGY OF POLITICAL COMMENTARIES IN R & B

The traditional lack of attentiveness to the content of political commentaries in R & B is illustrated by Ward's contention that "Rhythm and Blues absorbed changes in mass black consciousness and reflected them primarily by means of certain musical devices and performance techniques, rather than in the form of neat narrative expositions."<sup>23</sup> Even when analysts acknowledge the significance of R & B lyrical content, there has been a tendency to lump very different types of messages together in ways that overlook important distinctions and nuances. As an example, Van Deburg uses the construct of "updated protest songs" to implicitly conjoin a widely diverse list of songs, including the Impressions's, "Keep on Pushing," the Chi-Lites's, "(For God's Sake) Give More Power to the People," the Temptations's, "Message from a Black Man," and Gil Scott-Heron's, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised."<sup>24</sup>

The traditional use of broad, undifferentiated classifications introduces significant difficulty in fully appreciating the complexity of political thought contained in R & B lyrics. At the same time, some researchers have provided useful hints for developing a more refined typology of commentaries. It is generally agreed that the "documentary" is the most basic type of political commentary found in R & B lyrics. William Van Deburg suggests that the documentary "provide[s] a running commentary on the state of black culture."<sup>25</sup> In general, documentaries highlight negative conditions prevalent in black communities. Brian Ward argued that the "musical and lyrical affinity of R & B to the material circumstances of black lives, dictated that economic factors often loomed large in its songs, just as they did in black life."<sup>26</sup> Descriptions contained in documentaries are often presented using quasi-objective or non-pejorative language. This rhetorical strategy facilitates engagement with both internal and external audiences, with each able to frame distinct interpretations.

Three additional types of documentaries—"Jeremiads," "All God's Children Declarations," and "Defiant Challenges"—typically target an external audience. Borrowing from the analysis of African American speeches and sermons, Jeremiads incorporate three components: an assertion of the significance of core values ascribed to as a covenant with God; a declension detailing America's failure to live up to this promise with respect to its treatment of African Americans; and a prophecy outlining positive outcomes in the case of repentance, or negative consequences stemming from the perpetuation of the status quo.<sup>27</sup>

All God's Children Declarations tout common interests and shared experiences of African Americans and non-blacks to argue for equal treatment, removal of barriers to equality, and a reduction of intergroup conflict. Lyrics sometimes emphasize the role of external agents in changing conditions, but in many cases outsiders and insiders are simultaneously encouraged to work cooperatively to solve critical social problems. Ward

claims that most "engaged" soul songs of the early-to-mid 1960s . . . used quasi-religious imagery and the sounds of soul, rather than direct invocations of race, Jim Crow, or the Movement to make their racial provenance and political relevance obvious."<sup>28</sup> Defiant Challenges demand (rather than entreat) that external forces cease and desist from exploitative behavior. Threats or promises of negative outcomes from failure to terminate oppressive behavior or conditions are standard features. As suggested by the terminology, an aggressive lyrical style is employed with more limited use of nuance than in the other types of commentaries. Van Deburg suggested that such songs emphasize that significant changes in the social order are on the near horizon and are more likely to emanate from revolutionary than evolutionary processes.<sup>29</sup>

The other broad types of internally focused political commentaries can be called "Awareness Raising Self-Criticism," "Collective Self-Help Solutions," "Confrontation Declarations," "Revolutionary Manifestos," and "Spiritual Transcendence Explorations." Awareness Raising Self-Criticism is designed to educate listeners about the seriousness of a particular set of circumstances and to document the need for corrective action. Criticism can be leveled either generally or at specific groups such as politicians, business owners, preachers, or teachers. The primary bases of criticism are the lack of political awareness of the origins and severity of a problem, and the failure to take action to eliminate debilitating predicaments. As Van Deburg asserted, "Black Power era soulsters . . . taught that in order to alter social conditions, African Americans first had to change the way they looked at themselves."<sup>30</sup> At the same time, external forces are typically targeted as the major culprit producing negative conditions.

Collective Self-Help Solutions also attempt to sharpen political consciousness, but have the further objective of providing guidance for solving community problems. Michael Haralamabos in *Soul Music* observed, for example, that in some R & B, "concern is expressed for conditions in the poorer areas of black society . . . [and they] are condemned as something to be eradicated."<sup>31</sup> These commentaries attempt to mobilize individuals to work collectively in self-help problem solving activities that use local resources rather than relying on external aid. In some cases suggestions for specific strategies to ameliorate problematic conditions are offered.

Confrontational Declarations advocate aggressive self-defense actions to combat direct and indirect manifestations of external control in black communities by any means necessary, including violence. Law enforcement agents are often targeted as the most visible symbols of external political control. However, other external forces, such as purveyors of illicit drugs, are also identified as high priority targets for direct confrontational strategies. Existing neighborhood-based and national organizations are sometimes chastised for exhibiting timidity in protecting the interests of the community. These commentaries address external audiences indirectly through warnings about the consequences of not relinquishing control of key institutions in

black communities. Such commentaries flow directly from several variants of black nationalism prevalent during the Black Power era.<sup>32</sup>

Revolutionary Manifestos frame problems in African American communities within the context of broader patterns of global oppression. Calls for the wholesale restructuring of existing political and economic institutions constitute a major distinguishing feature of the lyrics. Global corporate capitalism and its localized manifestations are often the primary focus of revolutionary transformation commentaries. Audiences are called upon to connect with efforts of marginalized groups around the world to struggle for a more humane international order. From this vantage point, local control, as advocated in confrontation declarations may be necessary, but insufficient, to achieve true liberation. Consequently, coordination of efforts to maintain viable local communities and multi-cultural alliances are sometimes advocated, thus addressing external audiences indirectly. According to Van Deburg, such commentaries are grounded in the view held by some black leftists that, "the black nationalist struggle was one of both race and class and therefore necessarily linked to the struggles of Third World liberation movements."<sup>33</sup>

Spiritual Transcendence Explorations urge listeners to seek solutions to their daily struggles by achieving personal spiritual enlightenment. Presumably a higher spiritual consciousness can be achieved through meditation and diminished focus on the day-to-day confrontations surrounding race and racial inequality. Drug experimentation is often advocated as a means to move to a higher plane of existence. Thus, drug culture is seemingly transformed from a source of oppression into a liberation strategy. Widespread adoption of this lifestyle would presumably reduce racial tensions and contribute to the elevation of the general human condition. Deracialized imagery is sometimes used to increase the attractiveness of performers to external audiences. As suggested by Ward, such commentaries were especially attractive to some members of "the first generation of post-Movement, upwardly mobile, young middle-class African Americans, gamely testing the extent to which traditional barriers to black advancement really had been erased in the new meritocracy."<sup>34</sup> Key elements of each commentary type are summarized in Table 1.



**Table 1**  
**Political Commentary Typologies in Black Popular Music**

<b>Commentary Type</b>	<b>Audience(s)</b>	<b>Key Characteristics</b>
Documentary	Internal/External	Describes negative conditions designed to document the magnitude of problems and possible causes
Jeremiad	External	Challenges outsiders to implement humanitarian beliefs and values
All God's Children Declaration	External/Internal	Calls for equal treatment based on assertions of common interests and shared experiences
Defiant Challenge	External	Demands that external forces cease and desist from exploitative behavior
Awareness Raising Self-Criticism	Internal	Describes negative conditions designed to broaden concern within the community
Collective Self-Help Solution	Internal/External	Calls for collective problem-solving efforts relying on local resources
Confrontational Declaration	Internal/External	Advocates aggressive self-defense to confront direct and indirect manifestations of external control in black communities
Revolutionary Manifesto	Internal/External	Calls for overturning existing political and economic institutions to advance liberation struggles
Spiritual Transcendence Exploration	Internal/External	Advocates spiritual enlightenment to reduce social tension, with drug use sometimes advocated to heighten consciousness

The targeting of multiple audiences introduces complexity in efforts to interpret political themes. In addition, some commentaries do not fit neatly into any single category, exhibiting characteristics of more than one of the typologies. These issues pose no major hurdle because the classification of individual songs in this investigation is undertaken largely in support of exploration of the ways in which artists and writers have worked creatively to convey messages effectively. The classifications' principal value is as a means to ascertain the relative prevalence of particular types of statements. The classifications also facilitate the assessment of the extent to which performers and writers altered the orientation, content, and style of commentaries as social and political conditions changed and new technological capabilities emerged.

## POLITICAL COMMENTARY IN R & B

Although the typology introduced previously is designed primarily for the classification of political commentary in R & B and Hip Hop, it is important to recognize the potential applicability of this basic approach to other genres. For example, it has been applied directly to the examination of political commentary in the Blues, although it is unrealistic to expect that the Blues would exhibit the full range of political themes encompassed by this classification scheme.<sup>35</sup>

During the Jim Crow era of the early 20th century, Blues artists were subjected to the same forms of social control that were directed at other African Americans. As a consequence, the political commentaries that were advanced were structured to reduce the likelihood of a backlash from offended whites. The type of aggressive, challenging political commentaries that were fueled, for example, by the Black Power Movement were inconceivable to even the most visionary Blues performers. Instead, Blues artists used their finely honed descriptive skills to highlight the effects of oppression in ways designed to raise the awareness of sympathetic external audiences and/or promote solidarity among African Americans by documenting common experiences and enhancing the resolve to survive in the face of daily oppression. Documentaries, Jeremiads, and All God's Children Declarations were the principal Blues commentaries used to communicate with external audiences. Documentaries and All God's Children commentaries were also the principal vehicle for conveying a sense of common destiny among African Americans.<sup>36</sup>

Unlike the Blues, the content and style of political commentaries in R & B have been dominated by northern urban sensibilities, reflecting the influence of the large-scale out-migration from the South during the post-World War II period. The preeminence of Detroit (Motown) and Philadelphia (Philly Sound) as major sites of R & B music production was one outcome of this dramatic demographic shift away from the rural South. Chicago was also a major site of R & B creative production, and Curtis Mayfield emerged as one of the most incisive commentators in the R & B tradition.<sup>37</sup> Highlighting this pattern in no way diminishes the significance of southern-based labels such as Memphis-based Stax; however, the more hard-hitting political commentaries were likely to originate in the North, where African Americans faced less oppressive social controls.<sup>38</sup> Perry Hall has investigated how distinct south to north migration routes reproduced pre-existing geographic collectives with distinct cultural elements in specific northern cities. Hall argues that subtle differences in cultural sensibilities and experiences across communities are reflected in the music produced in each locale.<sup>39</sup> In some respects, this is an extension of Locke's arguments, allowing for disaggregation of the broad patterns of correlation between social conditions and music.

Commercialized R & B music was also a form of dance music and developed a highly stylized format with extensive instrumentation and was

packaged to maximize record sales. This genre was created by transforming traditional R & B through changes in lyrics and in the rhythmic organization of the music. The modified format was sanitized to ensure that it would not be overtly offensive to white audiences and could be easily duplicated by white artists selected to perform, i.e., cover songs originally performed by black artists.<sup>40</sup> This market orientation also encouraged a high degree of role differentiation among performers, writers, and producers. As a consequence, in many cases it is difficult to identify the precise source of ideas expressed in political commentaries.

A significant body of R & B songs with political commentary did not begin to appear until the mid-1960s after some of the initial victories in the Civil Rights Movement. Some early commentaries continued discussion of issues addressed previously in Blues lyrics. For example, Sam Cooke's "Chain Gang" (1962) is a stark reminder of how the criminal justice system operates as a vehicle of social control.<sup>41</sup> Reflecting the optimism that engulfed many during the early 1960s, R & B writers and performers expressed guarded optimism about the positive long-term outcomes of the freedom struggle. Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come," released in 1965 after his mysterious death, is a mournful, yet hopeful, call for a new political dispensation: "It's been a long time coming, but I know a change is gonna come, yes it will."<sup>42</sup> The Impressions' "Keep on Pushing" (1965), written by Curtis Mayfield, is another example of an internally directed commentary expressing confidence that the political and economic fortunes of African Americans were improving.<sup>43</sup>

The early successes of the Civil Rights Movement encouraged a flurry of both externally and internally focused commentaries with All God's Children characteristics, but without explicit religious references. Some songs use the metaphor of a train with passengers from different backgrounds traveling toward a common destination to capture the idea of shared interests in pursuing racial justice. The Impressions' "People Get Ready" (1964), written by Curtis Mayfield, is a classic example. Other songs using the train metaphor to invoke interracial unity images with no explicit religious reference include Gladys Knight and the Pips' (1969) "Friendship Train," written by Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong, and the O'Jays' "Love Train" (1972), written by Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff.<sup>44</sup>

Some internally focused commentaries urged African Americans to institute self-improvement strategies to demonstrate their worthiness of equal treatment. These lyrics combine elements of All God's Children, Awareness Raising Self-Criticism, and Collective Self-Help commentaries. The Staple Singers' "Respect Yourself" (1971), written by Mark Rice and Luther Ingram, is one example of this rhetorical strategy.<sup>45</sup> The Impressions' "Choice of Colors" (1969), written by Curtis Mayfield, uses a more indirect approach to convey a similar message:

People must say to the people,  
A better day is coming for you and for me;  
And with a little bit more education and love for our nation,  
We'll have a better society.<sup>46</sup>

The Four Tops' "Keeper of the Castle" (1972), written by Dennis Lambert and Brian Potter, emphasizes listeners' responsibility to maintain and improve the physical conditions in urban communities.<sup>47</sup> The cover of the album containing the title song, "Keeper of the Castle," presents two images of the same mansion, one tidy and well kept, the other dilapidated. This imagery suggests two possible futures for black communities, with the actual path depending heavily on choices made by African Americans themselves. The rhetorical strategy thus synthesizes Awareness Raising Self-Criticism and elements of Collective Self-Help commentary.

A more pessimistic body of Jeremiad political commentary began to appear in the early 1970s, induced in part by the failure of the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement to generate any significant changes in the quality of life for urban black residents. This thematic shift parallels the response of some Blues artists to the unrealized expectations associated with New Deal policies in the 1930s and 1940s. Stevie Wonder aptly captures this sentiment in a unique type of All God's Children commentary articulated in "Visions" (1973). Using allusions to the rhetoric and dream of Martin Luther King, Jr., Wonder questions whether significant progress in reducing inequality has occurred:

People hand in hand,  
Have I lived to see the milk and honey land?  
Where hate's a dream and love forever stands,  
Or is this a vision in my mind?  
Or is this a vision in my mind?<sup>48</sup>

The use of Jeremiad-like characteristics in this commentary is subtle—a strategy found in other commentaries as well. Roberta Flack's "Tryin' Times" (1969), written by Donny Hathaway and Leroy Hutson, is another example of a rhetorical strategy using understated Jeremiad features:

You got the riots and the ghettos,  
And it's all around;  
And a whole lot of things that are wrong,  
Are going down.  
I don't understand it,  
From my point of view,  
Somebody said do unto others,  
As you would have them do unto you.  
Folks wouldn't have to suffer,  
If there was more love for each other,  
These are trying times.<sup>49</sup>

Flack goes on to challenge listeners to become active in efforts to change the dynamics producing intergroup conflict, a theme also advanced in the Temptations' "You Make Your Own Heaven & Hell Right Here on Earth" (1970), written by Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong.<sup>50</sup> Stevie Wonder's "Jesus Children of America" (1973) is an interesting Jeremiad that takes to task listeners who presumably subscribe to religious values for failing to translate their beliefs into action.<sup>51</sup>

Curtis Mayfield's "(Don't Worry) If There's a Hell Below We're All Gonna Go" (1970) is one of the most innovative examples of this rhetorical strategy. The song begins with a monologue by a woman promoting the view that the simple solution to all of the world's problems is following the prescriptions set forth in the Bible. Mayfield then identifies various groups who are culpable for contributing to social ills, including sisters, brothers, whiteys, blacks, crackers, and the police and their supporters. He then describes various dysfunctional behaviors tolerated by all and enunciates the warning, "if there's a hell below, then we're all gonna go."<sup>52</sup>

In addition to its Jeremiad features, Mayfield's commentary is significant for its focus on the detailed description of oppressive conditions and concrete identification of perpetrators of exploitation. Other writers and performers have used documentary commentaries to convey the same type of message. Stevie Wonder's epic *Living for the City* (1973) is especially noteworthy for ingenious interweaving of several themes. Wonder describes the persistence of southern oppression that led to northern migration, the heroic efforts to inculcate traditional family values in the face of a myriad of dehumanizing forces, differences in the patterns of subordination faced by black males and females, difficulties in applying southern mores and values to conditions in the urban North, and likely outcomes when involvement with illicit drugs leads to engagement with a racist northern criminal justice system.<sup>53</sup>

Marvin Gaye's "Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)" (1971), written by Marvin Gaye and James Nyx, and "What's Going On" (1971), written by Al Cleveland, Marvin Gaye, and Renaldo Benson, both paint graphic pictures of deteriorating social conditions and offer stinging critiques of skewed public policy priorities. Portions of "Inner City Blues" exhibit subtle Defiant Challenge commentary characteristics:

Rockets, moon shots,  
Spend it on the have nots,  
Money, we make it,  
'Fore we see it you take it.  
Oh, make you want to holler,  
The way they do my life,  
Make me wanna holler,  
The way they do my life,  
This ain't livin', This ain't livin'.

In "What's Going On," Marvin Gaye pleads for allegiance to an alternative value system in an example of an Awareness Raising Self-Criticism:

Mother, mother  
    There's too many of you crying;  
Brother, brother, brother,  
    There's far too many of you dying.  
You know we've got to find a way,  
    To bring some lovin' here today—Yeah.  
Father, father, father we don't need to escalate,  
    You see, war is not the answer,  
For only love can conquer hate.  
    You know we've got to find a way,  
To bring some lovin' here today,  
    Picket lines and picket signs  
Don't punish me with brutality;  
    Talk to me, so you can see,  
Oh, what's going on,  
    Yeah, what's going on.<sup>54</sup>

The Black Power Movement and the emphasis on black pride arising in the mid-1960s and blossoming in the early 1970s inspired several Defiant Challenge commentaries that incorporated Black Power ideological elements. Representative songs articulating the theme of black pride include James Brown's "Say it Loud" (1969), and Billy Paul's "Am I Black Enough for You?" (1972), written by Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff.<sup>55</sup> James Brown's song is a counterexample to the general claim introduced previously about the relatively limited production of political commentaries by southern record labels, even though the lyrics are not especially creative. Gamble and Huff's lyrics emphasize the need for listeners to continue struggling until the goals have been achieved and to be steadfast in embracing their black identity, as expressed in the turn of phrase, "stay Black enough for you."

The struggle for power and self-determination also found voice in Defiant Challenge commentaries such as the Isley Brothers' "Fight the Power" (1975), written by Ernie Isley, Marvin Isley, O'Kelly Isley, Ronald Isley, Rudolph Isley, and Chris Jasper.<sup>56</sup> Other examples include the O'Jays' "Give the People the Power They Want" (1975), written by Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff, and the Chi-Lites' "(For God's Sake) Give More Power to the People" (1971), written by Eugene Record.<sup>57</sup> The challenge to black oppression was sometimes interwoven with strong anti-Vietnam War sentiment. Edwin Starr's version of "War (What Is It Good For)" (1970), written by Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong, set the tone for this type of commentary.<sup>58</sup> Freda Payne's "Bring the Boys Home" (1971), written by General Norman Johnson, Greg Perry, and Angelo Bond, links the war to family and relationship disruption.<sup>59</sup>

Marvin Gaye's "What's Happening Brother" (1971), written by James Nyx and Marvin Gaye, is another example of anti-war commentary that has more of a documentary style than Defiant Challenge. In this song, Gaye takes on

the role of a black veteran returning home after service in the war who is attempting to find out what changes have occurred in the situation of African Americans:

Hey baby, what'cha know good?  
I'm just gettin' back, but you knew I would.  
War is hell, when will it end,  
When will people start gettin' together again,  
Are things really gettin' better, like the newspaper said?

What else is new my friend, besides what I read?  
Money is tighter than it's ever been.  
Say man, I don't understand,  
What's going on across this land.  
Ah what's happening brother,  
Oh yeah, what's happening, my man?<sup>60</sup>

During the 1950s and 1960s the dissemination of musical political commentaries was facilitated by the heightened consciousness of many black disc jockeys and announcers on AM stations. They were among the first messengers of the Civil Rights Movement—announcing meetings, conducting interviews with civil rights leaders, and keeping listeners informed about developments in the struggle for equality and justice. They were also inclined to give significant airplay to R & B songs with political thrusts. However, as AM radio lost its popularity to FM formats in the 1970s, the new formats de-emphasized both disc jockeys and community affairs programming, and reduced the likelihood of airplay for political commentaries.<sup>61</sup> In addition, the transition from 7" to 12" records (LPs) as the industry standard was underway, although the impact of this transition on R & B was not manifested until the mid-1970s.<sup>62</sup> The shift to the LP as the industry standard facilitated consolidation in the record industry, and as media conglomerates came to exercise more and more control over the content of albums, it became less possible for most artists to have even one song with overt political content included on an album because of concerns about potentially negative effects on sales. As an illustration, Marvin Gaye faced strong resistance from Berry Gordy when he proposed the *What's Going On* album because Gordy saw little commercial potential in the project.<sup>63</sup> Gordy was wrong.

The emergence of the so-called blaxploitation film genre in the early 1970s was perhaps the most difficult challenge that writers and performers faced in seeking to maintain the role of R & B as a major source of political commentary in black communities. In essence, these films were associated with an inauthentic variant of the type of community theater described by Guthrie Ramsey in his book *Race Music*.<sup>64</sup> The brainchild of Hollywood magnates, these films were designed to bolster sagging Hollywood revenues by bringing African Americans into movie theaters. Moviemakers tapped into the growing frustration in black communities about persistent poverty and

lack of access to public resources, and they disseminated a perverse political message glorifying conspicuous consumption, gender exploitation, and illegal activities, such as drug dealing, as elements of a viable strategy for "getting over on the man." The powerful combination of visual imagery and audio enhancement had a much more pronounced effect on individual and collective sensibilities than traditional music stimuli. The titles of some of these productions are well known and include *Superfly* (1972) and *Across 110th Street* (1972).<sup>65</sup> In some ways, Berry Gordy's production of *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972), following Motown's relocation to California, was a counterattack on external efforts to define the representation of black life and culture in film. Through an in-depth examination of the tragic life of Billie Holiday (played by Diana Ross), Gordy emphasized the complexity and humanity of African Americans, in contrast to the caricatures offered in the blaxploitation genre. This seemingly progressive move is somewhat ironic given Gordy's resistance to Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On* album, discussed previously.<sup>66</sup>

Some socially conscious black musicians who were contracted to develop the soundtracks for blaxploitation films attempted to neutralize the thematic content and visual imagery by producing audio commentaries challenging the glorification of the underground economy. In effect, these cultural warriors engaged in a type of guerrilla campaign against external cultural manipulation. Two of the more notable examples are Curtis Mayfield's *Superfly* and Bobby Womack's *Across 110th Street* soundtracks.<sup>67</sup>

Curtis Mayfield's, "Freddy's Dead," is a five-and-a-half-minute-tribute to the tragically naïve Freddy, one of the film's main casualties. A good-hearted yet weak-willed man caught up in the life of a pusher, Freddy is killed unceremoniously in the cutthroat world navigated by the *Superfly* character played by Ron O'Neal. Mayfield asks listeners to think beyond immediate gratification and understand the larger political and economic forces that shape the scenarios producing tragic endings like the death of Freddy:

We're all filled up with progress,  
 But sometimes I must confess,  
 We can deal with rockets and dreams,  
 But reality, what does it mean?  
 Ain't nothing said,  
 'Cause Freddy's dead.

Mayfield goes on to challenge black men to reevaluate their engagement with the underworld via Awareness Raising Self-Criticism:

If you don't try,  
 You're gonna die.  
 Why can't we brothers  
 Protect one another?  
 No one's serious,  
 And it makes me furious,  
 Don't be misled,  
 Just think of Fred.<sup>68</sup>



Bobby Womack's "Across 110th Street," written by Womack and J. J. Johnson also focuses on one character in a larger drama. However, in this case an autobiographical approach is used to describe how black males can easily become entangled in the underworld:

I was the third brother of five,  
 Doing whatever I had to do to survive.  
 I'm not saying what I did was alright,  
 But breaking out of the ghetto is a day-to-day fight.  
 Been down so long it never did cross my mind,  
 I knew there was a better way of life I was just trying to find.  
 You don't know what you'll do 'til you're put under pressure,  
 Cause 110th Street is a hell of a tester.

In the closing stanza Womack offers a Collective Self-Help Solution in making a plea for black men to cease and desist from engagement with the drug trade and examine the social function of the ghetto within the larger political economy:

Hey Brother, there's a better way out,  
 Snorting that coke, shooting that dope;  
 Man you're copping out.  
 Take my advice, its either live or die,  
 You gotta be strong if you want to survive.

The families on the other side of town,  
 Would catch hell without a ghetto around.  
 In every city the same thing is going down,  
 Harlem is the capital of every ghetto town.<sup>69</sup>

In both examples the individual case studies are used to engage in Awareness Raising Self-Criticism. However, since the commentaries are designed to counteract the negative imagery in the films rather than fully explore alternative survival strategies, the potential to incorporate Collective Self-Help Solutions effectively was limited. To some extent, Curtis Mayfield was able to broaden the dialogue regarding the sources of oppression in the monologue and first chorus of "The Cocaine Song" on the *Superfly* album.

I've met many people over the years,  
 And in my opinion I have found that people are the same everywhere.  
 They have the same fears,  
 Shed similar tears,  
 Die in so many years.

The oppressed seem to have suffered the most,  
 In every continent, coast to coast.  
 Now our lives are in the hands of the pusher man;  
 We break it all down so you might understand  
 How to protect yourself.

Don't make no profit for the man.  
I'm so glad I got my own;  
So glad that I can see,  
My life's a natural high,  
The man can't put no thing on me.<sup>70</sup>

Mayfield's international references suggest elements of Revolutionary Manifestos while the invocation of "a natural high" is representative of the type of language used in some Spiritual Transcendence Explorations.

Although, as noted previously, southern record labels such as Stax were less likely to produce a significant body of political commentary, artists associated with the Stax label did have a visible impact on the political climate. The film *Wattsax*, originally released in 1973, illustrates how political commentary in R & B and Soul music was introduced into new "community theatre" settings. The live performance community theater approach represented by *Wattsax* constituted another type of musically based counterforce to the blaxploitation films of the early 1970s. *Wattsax* is an interesting combination of documentary and Awareness Raising Self-Criticism embedded in a cinematic format. The film, produced by Mel Stuart, is a retrospective dedicated to the Watts riots of 1965. The primary focus of the film is the Watts Summer Festival's concert held at the Los Angeles Coliseum in 1972. The concert featured various Soul music artists, including Isaac Hayes, Rufus Thomas, the Staple Singers, the Bar Kays, and Luther Ingram. The concert footage is interwoven with interviews dissecting "the State of Black America" in the early 1970s and the effects of the riots on both Los Angeles and the U.S.<sup>71</sup>

Philadelphia International Records also exhibited impressive creativity in harnessing its unmistakable "Sound of Philadelphia" to produce some of the best examples of organic Awareness Raising Self-Criticism and Collective Self-Help commentaries of the 1970s. As noted by Nelson George, although the lyrics are carefully crafted to avoid assignment of culpability for problems to outside forces, Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes' "Wake Up Everybody" (1975), written by Gene McFadden and John Whitehead, as well as McFadden and Whitehead's "Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now" (1979), are important examples of this approach.<sup>72</sup>

The album *Let's Clean Up the Ghetto* (1977) captures the essence of the broader Philadelphia International initiative.<sup>73</sup> The record company's ability to mount this type of community empowerment venture, while functioning essentially as a component of CBS's black music department, is an interesting contrast to the more traditional style of corporate control of lyrical content discussed previously. This album features the Philadelphia International All-Stars: Lou Rawls, the O'Jays, Teddy Pendergrass, Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes, Billy Paul, Dee Dee Sharp Gamble, the Intruders, Archie Bell and the Drells, and The Three Degrees. The title song, written by Kenny Gamble, Leon Huff, and Cary Gilbert, is a medley involving most of the All-Stars that

implores listeners to participate in a physical clean up effort "because the ghetto is our home."<sup>74</sup> The titles of several of the other songs on the album convey the album's broader thrust including, "Now Is the Time to Do It," "Year of Decision," "New Day, New World Comin'," and "Save the Children."<sup>75</sup> The organization's emergent community development strategy was announced in Kenneth Gamble's prominently placed message on the album cover: "The only way we can clean up the *physical* ghetto is to first clean up the *mental* ghetto. With the help of almighty God, we will be able to turn this community into a positive system. Our first step is cleanliness, 'cause it's the closest thing to godliness." Philadelphia International Records demonstrated its commitment by donating all profits from the album to charity for five years.<sup>76</sup> The religious reference is not easy to interpret using the classification system presented in this investigation. Nelson George observes that by the mid-1970s, Kenneth Gamble viewed Philadelphia International in part as "a platform from which to proselytize, espousing a world view that obliquely revealed his private belief in the tenets of Islam."<sup>77</sup> Gamble's attachment to the Nation of Islam introduces a different perspective on the traditional focus of All God's Children Declarations that reference Christian theology. Nevertheless, the message resonated with adherents to Christianity through its invocation of shared values of community empowerment.

The relocation of Motown from Detroit to Los Angeles circa 1972 raises several interesting issues. It can be argued that the relocation dismantled whatever potential existed for Motown to serve as a significant community theater in which important political commentary originated. Some argue that Gordy provided little notice of his intentions, disrupting the lives of the members of the "Motown family" when the planned move was formally announced, while others claim that plans for the move had been developed well in advance.<sup>78</sup> Whichever version is accurate, there is little doubt that differences in regional culture and political consciousness, along with the departures of several important artists, necessitated a change in Motown's orientation and operations so that by the mid-1970s, it was no longer a significant source of incisive political commentaries. The Commodores' "Visions" (1978), written by Thomas McClary and Lionel Ritchie, is illustrative of the few attempts by Motown to produce political commentary during this period. Released on the album titled, *Natural High*, the lyrics essentially sample earlier commentaries by slightly modifying phrases like "one day a change is gonna come" (recall Sam Cooke) and "I see visions in my mind" (Stevie Wonder).<sup>79</sup> The song fits easily into the Spiritual Transcendence commentary classification, with the focus on a "natural high."

The use of the "natural high" and "visions" metaphors is one indicator of the influence of a new style of political commentary that emerged during this period in Funk music. James Brown is often credited with originating the upbeat musical style characterized as "Funk," that relies heavily on syncopated rhythms, a thick bass line, extensive use of rhythm guitars and a rhythm-oriented horn section, and chanted or hollered vocals.<sup>80</sup> The West

Coast was an important community theater production site for Funk music that incorporated political commentaries. In some respects the West Coast locus of this genre represented a counterreaction to the high levels of confrontation emerging out of the Watts Riot of 1965 and the activities of the Black Panthers and U.S.<sup>81</sup> Thus, although the titles of "Don't Call Me Nigger, Whitey" (1969) and "Stand" (1969), performed by Sly and the Family Stone, seemingly imply an assertive political line, the lyrics and the musical format project a very different perspective.<sup>82</sup> "Don't Call Me Nigger, Whitey" is most notable for the use of synthesized voices, the extensive use of the electric guitar to produce discordant sounds, and minimalist lyrics, all of which become important elements of Funk music. "Stand" actually promotes an individualistic notion of empowerment, deliberately avoiding any mention of specific groups. A similar rhetorical strategy is employed in "Everyday People" (1969), in which references to blue and yellow people, long hair and short hair, and rich ones and poor ones appear to be used to avoid potential damage to the "crossover" potential that might result from language explicitly addressing black-white relations.<sup>83</sup>

The Motown group, led by writers/producers Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong, responded to the challenge posed by the new format with its own variant of this genre, "psychedelic soul." The primary examples were the well-known Temptations' hits "Cloud Nine" (1969) and "Runaway Child Running Wild" (1969). These songs focus respectively on drugs and teenage rebellion, and are largely documentaries that offer little guidance for overcoming the problems dramatized in the lyrics.<sup>84</sup> The "new" Temptations were greeted as representatives of the counterculture, a status solidified when they recorded Norman Whitfield's outspoken protest against the Vietnam War, "Stop the War Now."<sup>85</sup>

Spiritual Transcendence commentaries began to proliferate in the early and mid-1970s. To some extent such commentaries reflect disillusionment with the failure of political advocacy and the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement to overcome structural inequalities. Between 1972 and 1975 the median income of black families was stagnant and the unemployment rate for black men jumped from 7.0 to 12.5 percent.<sup>86</sup> In addition, widespread resistance to busing to obtain public school desegregation also arose during this period. These social conditions provide a context for the type of Spiritual Transcendence commentaries exemplified by Earth, Wind, and Fire's "Keep Your Head to the Sky" (1973), written by Maurice White, and "That's the Way of the World" (1975), written by Maurice White, Charles Stepney, and Verdine White. Listeners are told in "That's the Way of the World":

You will find, you will find peace of mind,  
If you look way down in your heart and soul,  
Don't hesitate, 'cause the world seems cold,  
Stay young at heart, 'cause you'll never, never part.<sup>87</sup>

At the same time, however, there are a few cases where Funk artists produced Defiant Challenge commentaries. Housing segregation persisted in most major urban areas between 1960 and 1970, including Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington, DC, enabling the election of black mayors in many of these cities in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>88</sup> Parliament's examination of majority black urban centers in "Chocolate City" (1975), written by George Clinton, William Collins, and Bernard Worrell, uses an interesting combination of spoken word and abrupt chord changes to present a euphemistic tribute to black control of urban centers. The "Chocolate City" and "CC" metaphors are used to characterize cities where black majorities were likely to emerge and to stake a political claim on those spaces:

Hey CC, they say you jive and game, and can't be changed.  
But on the positive side, you're my piece of the rock,  
And I love you, can you dig it?<sup>89</sup>

Black majorities in many central cities are suggested to be one outcome of the failure of external forces to address long-standing injustices: "Hey, we didn't get our forty acres and a mule, but we did get you, CC." The chorus "gaining on you" is used extensively as a subtle warning to external audiences about unspecified consequences from demographic shifts producing urban black majorities. The implicit message is that outsiders would be well advised to support policies that reduce structural inequalities.

In many respects, Parliament is an outlier in the Funk genre. Nelson George argues that this group's orientation was shaped by its Detroit origins and influenced by the radical politics found in this metropolitan area. More generally, Funk and Disco, popular in the 1970s, do not fit readily into any of the categories in Table 1, with their orientation toward party and dance music. Nelson George argues that Disco was a disruptive outside force that helped to pull R & B "away from its roots." More pointedly, he maintains that between 1976 and 1980 Disco music evolved into "a sound of mindless repetition and lyrical idiocy that, with exceptions, overwhelmed R & B."<sup>90</sup> A more charitable assessment might conclude that both Funk and Disco were not wholly devoid of political connotations. Both are prime examples of the phenomenon described by Thomas Poole as the creation of party music in circumstances where there is no reason to party as a form of defiant celebration in the face of "dehumanizing" hostility and oppression.<sup>91</sup>

Revolutionary commentaries, as exemplified by the music of Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets, served as a counterforce to the tendency toward muted political commentary in black popular music in the mid and late 1970s. A self-described "Bluesician," Scott-Heron positioned himself to resurrect the tradition of political commentary in the Blues. Tracing his lineage directly to Langston Hughes, Scott-Heron stated his intent to "adapt certain theories [used by] . . . Robeson, Hughes, and others [and] . . . [work] these theories in

our own context around South Africa, life concerns, and daily living."<sup>92</sup> Hughes's poem "Letter to the Academy" (1933) exhibits a cadence and content similar to many of Scott-Heron's compositions:

But please, all you gentlemen with beards who are so wise and old  
And who write better than we do,  
And whose souls have triumphed,  
(In spite of hungers and wars and the evils about you),  
And whose books have soared in calmness and beauty  
Aloof from the struggle to the library shelves,  
And the desks of students and who are now classics-come forward  
And speak upon the subject of the Revolution.  
We want to know what in the hell you'd say?<sup>93</sup>

Scott-Heron's debt to the Blues is demonstrated most concretely in the internally oriented commentary, "The Get Out of the Ghetto Blues," in which he attacks the lack of political consciousness among African Americans, irrespective of their social circumstances:

I know you think you're cool,  
Lord, if they bus your kids to school,  
I know you think you're cool,  
Just 'cause they bus your kids to school.  
But you ain't got a thing to lose,  
You just got the "Get Out of the Ghetto Blues."  
I know you think you're cool,  
If you gettin' two welfare checks.  
You done told me you think you're cool,  
Because you gettin' two welfare checks.  
Yeah, but you got ten years to lose (if you get caught),  
Just trying to fight the "Get Out of the Ghetto Blues."<sup>94</sup>

Scott-Heron's best known composition, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," is directed at both internal and external audiences. In this spoken word treatise Heron lambasts popular culture, the police, traditional civil rights leaders, and advertising by multinational corporations, using rhetorical strategies similar to those employed in the earlier commentary, "When the Revolution Comes," (1970) written by Oyewole, and performed by The Original Last Poets:

There will be no pictures of pigs shooting down brothers on the instant replay,  
There will be no pictures of pigs shooting down brothers on the instant replay,  
There will be no pictures of Whitney Young being run out of Harlem on a rail with a  
brand new process.  
There will be no slow motion or still lifes of Roy Wilkins strolling through Watts in a  
red, black, and green jumpsuit he has been saving just for a special occasion.  
Green Acres, Beverly Hillbillies, and Hooterville Junction will no longer be so damn  
relevant.  
And no one will care if Dick finally got down with Jane on "Search for Tomorrow,"  
Because Black people will be in the streets looking for a brighter day  
The Revolution will not be televised.<sup>95</sup>

## PASSING THE TORCH—FROM THE BLUES AND R & B TO HIP HOP

Of course, the revolution envisioned by Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets did not materialize, and a complex of economic, political, sociological, and technological forces would converge in the 1980s and delimit the prevalence and range of political commentaries in R & B. Conditions in inner-city black communities worsened considerably following Ronald Reagan's election as President. Reagan moved swiftly to discredit and/or dismantle federally funded antipoverty, job training, and affirmative action programs. He appointed archconservatives to head the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and the United States Civil Rights Commission (USCRC) who, in turn, reduced sharply or invalidated thousands of discrimination suits filed against employers. White racists and hate groups were emboldened by Reagan's anti-civil rights posture. Racial attacks and harassment of African Americans and other minorities increased dramatically during his second term in office, including racial incidents on several major college campuses. The Reagan administration also introduced sharp cuts in financial aid that limited college access for poor black and other non-white students.<sup>96</sup>

At the same time, the number of black elected officials continued to expand, creating the illusion of broad inclusion and creating difficulty in identifying the agents responsible for the worsening conditions. This ambiguity, in turn, inhibited political awareness and the articulation of easily digested political commentaries. Many members of the black middle class were able to escape the dismal conditions in inner cities and relocate to suburbs—segregation actually declined between 1980 and 1990 in most of the major urban centers.<sup>97</sup> This exodus accelerated disinvestment processes in inner cities and heightened social isolation. Overall, the real median incomes of African American men, women, and families were stagnant between 1975 and 1985. The black male unemployment rate, which was 12.5 percent in 1975, rose even higher to 13.2 percent in 1985, and remained in double digits at 10.4 percent in 1990.<sup>98</sup> Correspondingly, the number of African Americans newly incarcerated in federal and state prisons escalated from approximately 58,000 in 1980 to 87,000 by 1985—a figure that would almost double by 1990 to 169,500.<sup>99</sup>

Thus, since the 1980s, R & B, and Hip Hop political commentators have been forced to address worsening social problems, including high unemployment, police brutality, incarceration, inadequate public schools, political apathy, and dysfunctional behaviors that perpetuate oppression. In the R & B tradition, Fatback's R & B-influenced documentary, "Is This the Future?" (1983), written by Gerry Thomas, uses the spoken word format, a staple of Hip Hop, and an R & B musical background, to draw connections between deplorable conditions in black communities and public policies.<sup>100</sup>

During the same time period, the Hip Hop classic, "The Message," was released, exploring many of the same issues. Grandmaster Flash and the

Furious Five's "The Message" (1982), written by Ed Fletcher, Melvin Glover, Sylvia Robinson, and Clifton Chase, is more of a Defiant Challenge commentary. While the lyrics are articulated in a classic Hip Hop spoken word cadence, the background music infuses both traditional R & B and Funk elements. The song contains the type of graphic description of oppressive conditions found in the best Blues and R & B commentaries, and issues the type of subtle warnings to external audiences found in some of the more assertive R & B commentaries:

It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder  
 How I keep from going under.  
 It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder  
 How I keep from going under.  
 Broken glass everywhere,  
 People pissing on the stairs, you know they just don't care.  
 I can't take the smell, can't take the noise,  
 I got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice,  
 Rats in the front room, roaches in the back  
 Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat.  
 I tried to get away, but I couldn't get far,  
 A man with a tow truck repossessed my car.  
 Don't push me cause I'm close to the edge,  
 I'm trying not to lose my head.<sup>101</sup>

Hip Hop, as a new community theater project, initially emerged as a form of mass expression, largely unfettered by corporate attachments, fueled by the harsh realities of inner-city life. Its origins in street performance reflected, in part, the pervasive stultifying effects of commercial control of media outlets. The general black media climate is characterized by a pattern of growing consolidation in ownership and control. This process has had especially negative effects on black radio news, a key complement to R & B political commentaries in the 1960s and early 1970s. The decline of black radio news has conditioned listeners to expect mundane news broadcasts, thereby dulling listeners' receptivity to incisive political commentaries by progressive Hip Hop artists. *Black Commentator* argues that "the near death of black radio news has been a major factor in the erosion of black political organization nationwide" and that "chains like Radio One gradually eliminated news from the mix, offering syndicated or local talk instead, and pretending that morning radio jockeys could double as news people."<sup>102</sup>

Even given these major constraints, Hip Hop's organic linkages to R & B suggest that its approaches to conveying political commentary will exhibit many of the same developmental patterns observed for R & B. As a consequence, the classification scheme introduced in this investigation can be used both to recognize patterns and track general tendencies in the evolution of commentaries.

Nas, for example, uses the documentary format effectively to describe historical and contemporary patterns of oppression in black communities in



the song "Black Zombie," and the Jeremiad commentary has been creatively adapted by the British alternative Hip Hop group, Jamiroquai, in the song "Emergency on Planet Earth."<sup>103</sup> Michael Franti offers an innovative All God's Children commentary in "Stay Human (All the Freaky People)." Franti calls on people of all cultures, races, and ethnicities to address common problems and to stop perceiving each other as "freaky people" and recognize that they are "all God's children."<sup>104</sup> Mos Def's "Umi Says" is a solid example of a Spiritual Transcendence Exploration in which he calls on Umi (his mother) and Abi (another spiritual being) to help black people overcome their problems in the face of moral uncertainty.<sup>105</sup>

Tupac Shakur provides a paradigmatic example of a Defiant Challenge commentary in the song "Troublesome 96," in which he declares "in your wildest dreams, you couldn't picture a nigga like me."<sup>106</sup> In what is probably the classic Confrontational Declaration commentary, "Fuck tha Police" by NWA, the promise is made that "Ice Cube will swarm on any muthafucka in a blue uniform."<sup>107</sup> The link between earlier and contemporary political commentaries is illustrated by Common's collaboration with the Last Poets on the composition "The Corner." In this Awareness Raising Self-Criticism, Kanye West laments that "on the corners niggaz rob or kill and dyin' just to make a livin'," while the Last Poets remind listeners that "the corner was our Rock of Gibraltar, our Stonehenge, our Taj Mahal, our monument, our testimonial to freedom, to peace, and to love."<sup>108</sup> To address these issues, Jurassic 5 proposes that the people take it back to the concrete streets (the community) in the Collective Self-Help commentary "Concrete Schoolyard."<sup>109</sup> Finally, The Coup issue a powerful Revolutionary Manifesto in "Ride the Fence," challenging imperialism and corporate greed and calling for proactive and direct challenges to global oppression.<sup>110</sup>

Unfortunately, some of the evolutionary parallels between Hip Hop and R & B are problematic for the continuing production of incisive Hip Hop political commentaries. Despite unprecedented success in establishing and maintaining independent record labels, paralleling the early years of Motown, many Hip Hop moguls seem singly oriented toward the pursuit of profit, with little concern for the social and political content of their products. In the representational arena, Hip Hop artists face many challenges, not the least of which is the rebirth of dysfunctional and denigrating imagery propagated through blaxploitation in both films and music videos. Interestingly, Nelson George argues that the old blaxploitation films have been appropriated by some Hip Hop artists for their own purposes.<sup>111</sup> To the extent that these purposes mirror the precedents set by Curtis Mayfield and Bobby Womack (discussed previously), there will be cause for optimism, but no such figure has yet emerged on the Hip Hop scene. Instead, the traditional images of the "pimp" and "hustler" are alive and well and have been introduced into product lines such as Nellie's "Pimp Juice," a recent addition to the energy drink market.

There are, however, a few encouraging signs. The Hip Hop community-sponsored "Stop the Violence" and "Get Out the Vote" initiatives clearly follow in the footsteps of some of the more progressive efforts by R & B artists. As an example, the "Stop the Violence" movement bears some similarities to Philadelphia International's community development initiatives.<sup>112</sup> Efforts by Hip Hop artists to encourage greater voter participation can, to some extent, offset the depoliticizing influences of the changes in black owned radio discussed previously.<sup>113</sup> Several major figures in the world of Hip Hop have also established foundations to promote community development in the spirit of previous Philadelphia International efforts.<sup>114</sup> While the jury is still out on the success and sustainability of these initiatives, one can hope that these are early indications of a political re-awakening that can realize the liberatory potential of Hip Hop.

### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>For a treatment of black male-female relationships in black music using a similar methodology, see James B. Stewart, "Relationships Between Black Males and Females in Rhythm and Blues Music of the 1960s and 1970s," *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 3 (3, 1979): 186-96.

<sup>2</sup>A partial list of monographs that include some discussion of political commentary in R & B or related genres would include Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music* (New York, 1995); Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York, 1988); Michael Haralambos, *Soul Music, The Birth of a Sound in Black America* (New York, 1974); Marc Anthony Neal, *Songs in the Key of Black Life, A Rhythm and Blues Nation* (New York, 2003); William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon, The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago, 1992); and Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding, Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley, CA, 1998).

<sup>3</sup>See Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in *Negro: An Anthology*, ed., Nancy Cunard (New York, 1970), 39-46.

<sup>4</sup>Du Bois describes the "Sorrow Songs" in Chapter 14 of *The Souls of Black Folk*, entitled "Of the Sorrow Songs." W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago, 1903).

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>6</sup>Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (New York, 1969).

<sup>7</sup>Locke, *The Negro and His Music*, 13.

<sup>8</sup>Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 10.

<sup>9</sup>Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, 205.

<sup>10</sup>Quoted in Haralambos, *Soul Music*, 118.

<sup>11</sup>Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 429.

<sup>12</sup>David Kraemer, C. Neil Macrae, Adam E. Green, and William M. Kelley, "Musical Imagery: Sound of Silence Activates Auditory Cortex," *Nature* 434 (10 March 2005), 158.

<sup>13</sup>Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 226-27.

<sup>14</sup>Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 203.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Neal, *Songs in the Key of Black Life*, 142.

<sup>17</sup>Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 179.

<sup>18</sup>For an impressive audio collection of songs that facilitated movement on the Underground Railroad, see Reggie and Kim Harris, *Steal Away, Songs of the Underground Railroad*. Appleseed Recordings (1997). Samuel Floyd discusses how the chariot trope has been "repeated and revised many times in many titles" in *The Power of Black Music*, 213.

<sup>19</sup>Many of these issues are discussed extensively in George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*.

<sup>20</sup>Guthrie Ramsey, *Race Music* (Berkeley, CA, 2003): 77.

<sup>21</sup>Brian Ward, *Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South* (Gainesville, FL, 2004).

<sup>22</sup>Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, 215.

<sup>23</sup>Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 14.

<sup>24</sup>Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, 213.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 215.

<sup>26</sup>Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 204.

<sup>27</sup>See, for example, David Howard-Pitney, *The Afro-American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (Philadelphia, PA, 1990).

<sup>28</sup>Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 300.

<sup>29</sup>Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, 212–13.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Haralambos, *Soul Music*, 121.

<sup>32</sup>Assertions of the need for African Americans to control key community institutions were endorsed by most nationalists; however, claims advancing the right to engage in retaliatory violence had significantly fewer adherents. See the discussion of these issues in Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, 152–55.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 154.

<sup>34</sup>Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 428. Ward refers specifically here only to the attractiveness of Disco.

<sup>35</sup>James B. Stewart, "Message in the Music: Political Commentary in pre-Hip Hop Black Popular Music Lyrics," unpublished manuscript.

<sup>36</sup>This interpretation of the essence of the Blues has been presented by various researchers, for example, see Daphne Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick, 1988).

<sup>37</sup>The important role of northern urban centers in the development of R & B has been discussed by several authors, including Nelson George in *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* and Brian Ward in *Just My Soul Responding*.

<sup>38</sup>For an in-depth discussion of Stax and southern R & B or Soul, see Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (New York, 1986).

<sup>39</sup>Perry Hall, *In the Vineyard: Working in African American Studies* (Knoxville, TN, 1999).

<sup>40</sup>This interpretation is found in Jonathan Kamin, "Parallels in the Social Reaction to Jazz and Rock," *The Black Perspective in Music* 3 (1978), 278–98.

<sup>41</sup>Sam Cooke, "Chain Gang," *The Best of Sam Cooke*, vocals by Sam Cooke, RCA Victor (1962).

<sup>42</sup>Sam Cooke, "A Change is Gonna Come," *The Best of Sam Cooke, Volume 2*, vocals by Sam Cooke, RCA Victor (1965).

<sup>43</sup>Curtis Mayfield, "Keep on Pushing," *Keep on Pushing*, vocals by the Impressions, ABC-Paramount (1965).

<sup>44</sup>Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong, "Friendship Train," *Gladys Knight & the Pips Greatest Hits*, vocals by Gladys Knight & the Pips, Soul (1969); Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff, "Love Train," *Back Stabbers*, vocals by the O'Jays, Philadelphia International Records (1972).

<sup>45</sup>Mark Rice and Luther Ingram, "Respect Yourself," *Beatitude: Respect Yourself*, performed by the Staple Singers, Stax Records (1972).

<sup>46</sup>Curtis Mayfield, "Choice of Colors," *The Young Mods' Forgotten Story*, vocals by the Impressions, Buddah Records (1969).

<sup>47</sup>Dennis Lambert and Brian Potter, "Keeper of the Castle," *Keeper of the Castle*, vocals by the Four Tops, ABC Records (1972).

- <sup>48</sup>Stevie Wonder, "Visions," *Innervisions*, vocals by Stevie Wonder, Tamla Records (1972). For an in-depth discussion of political themes in the music of Stevie Wonder, see Deborah Atwater, "Political and Social Messages in the Music of Stevie Wonder" in *African-American Rhetoric: A Reader*, ed., Lyndrey Niles (Dubuque, IA, 1995): 139–49.
- <sup>49</sup>Donny Hathaway and Leroy Hutson, "Tryin' Times," *First Take*, vocals by Roberta Flack, Atlantic Recording Corporation (1969).
- <sup>50</sup>Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong, "You Make Your Own Heaven and Hell Right Here on Earth," *Psychedelic Shack*, vocals by the Temptations, Gordy Records (1970). My thanks to Caryl Sheffield for recommending this song.
- <sup>51</sup>Stevie Wonder, "Jesus Children of America," *Innervisions*, vocals by Stevie Wonder, Tamla Records (1972).
- <sup>52</sup>Curtis Mayfield, "(Don't Worry) If There Is a Hell Below We're All Gonna Go," *Curtis*, vocals by Curtis Mayfield, Curtom Records (1970).
- <sup>53</sup>Stevie Wonder, "Living for the City," *Innervisions*, vocals by Stevie Wonder, Tamla Records (1972).
- <sup>54</sup>Marvin Gaye and James Nyx, "Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)," *What's Going On*, vocals by Marvin Gaye. Tamla Records (1971); Al Cleveland, Marvin Gaye, and Renaldo Benson, "What's Going On," *What's Going On*, vocals by Marvin Gaye, Tamla Records (1971).
- <sup>55</sup>James Brown and James Ellis, "Say It Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud," *Say It Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud*, vocals by James Brown, King Records (1969). James Brown is, of course, a contradictory figure in terms of political stances. His songs "America Is My Home" and "Living in America" extol a much more integrationist message. This contradiction has been highlighted by Nelson George in *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, 103. Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff, "Am I Black Enough for You," *360 Degrees of Billy Paul*, vocals by Billy Paul, Philadelphia International Records (1972).
- <sup>56</sup>Ernie Isley, Marvin Isley, O'Kelly Isley, Ronald Isley, Rudolph Isley, and Chris Jasper, "Fight the Power," *The Heat Is On*. T-Neck (1975).
- <sup>57</sup>Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff, "Give the People What They Want," *Survival*, vocals by the O'Jays, Philadelphia International Records (1975); Eugene Record, "(For God's Sake) Give More Power to the People," (*For God's Sake*) *Give More Power to the People*, vocals by the Chi-Lites, Brunswick Records (1971). My thanks to Caryl Sheffield for suggesting this song.
- <sup>58</sup>Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong, "War (What Is It Good For)," *War & Peace*, vocals by Edwin Starr, Gordy Records (1970). Originally recorded by the Temptations.
- <sup>59</sup>General Norman Johnson, Greg Perry, and Angelo Bond, "Bring the Boys Home," *Contact*, vocals by Freda Payne, Invictus (1971). My thanks to Perry Hall for suggesting this song.
- <sup>60</sup>James Nyx and Marvin Gaye, "What's Happening Brother," *What's Going On*, vocals by Marvin Gaye, Tamla Records (1971).
- <sup>61</sup>For more information about the history and activities of disc jockeys and announcers on black AM stations, see the Smithsonian programs exploring various dimensions of black radio at <http://www.si.edu/sp/onair/radpgms.htm>. Nelson George insists in *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* that AM stations that are black owned and oriented are culpable, along with FM, for diluting their black image in order to attract more ad revenues.
- <sup>62</sup>For a useful discussion of the impact of technological changes on R & B, see April Reilly, "The Impact of Technology on Rhythm and Blues," *The Black Perspective in Music* 1 (No. 2, 1973): 136–46; Dave Marsh argued that singles still dominated R & B through the mid-1970s—see *The Heart of Rock & Soul: The 1001 Greatest Singles Ever Made* (1989; reprinted New York, 1999).
- <sup>63</sup>For an account of the tensions between Gordy and Gaye surrounding the album, *What's Going On*, see Bill Dahl, *Motown: The Golden Years* (Iola, WI, 2001), 79.
- <sup>64</sup>Ramsey, *Race Music*.
- <sup>65</sup>In *Across 110th Street* actors Paul Benjamin and Ed Bernard play two Harlem residents driven by desperate circumstances to steal \$300,000 from the local mob. In *Superfly*, actor Ron O'Neal plays Youngblood Priest, a Harlem coke dealer who wants to get out of the business but must outwit the cops who have a vested interest in the Harlem dope trade.
- <sup>66</sup>See note 64.
- <sup>67</sup>Curtis Mayfield, *Superfly*, Curtom Records (1972); Bobby Womack, *Across 110th Street*, United Artist Records (1972).

<sup>68</sup>Curtis Mayfield, "Freddie's Dead," *Superfly*, vocals by Curtis Mayfield, Curtom Records (1972).

<sup>69</sup>Bobby Womack and J. J. Johnson, "Across 110th Street," *Across 110th Street*, vocals by Bobby Womack and Peace, United Artist Records (1972).

<sup>70</sup>Curtis Mayfield, "No Thing on Me," *Superfly*, vocals by Curtis Mayfield, Curtom Records (1972). Thanks to Perry Hall for this recommendation.

<sup>71</sup>A review of the film *Wattsax* by George Singleton can be found at <http://www.reelmoviecritic.com/movies20034q/id1947.htm>. My thanks to Tom Poole for suggesting this source.

<sup>72</sup>Gene McFadden and John Whitehead, "Wake Up Everybody," *Wake Up Everybody*, vocals by Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes, Philadelphia International Records (1975); Gene McFadden and John Whitehead, "Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now," *McFadden & Whitehead*, vocals by Gene McFadden and John Whitehead, Philadelphia International Records (1979).

<sup>73</sup>Kenny Gamble, Leon Huff, and Cary Gilbert, "Let's Clean Up the Ghetto," *Let's Clean Up the Ghetto*, vocals by the Philadelphia International All-Stars, Philadelphia International (1977).

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup>John Whitehead, Gene McFadden, and Victor Carstarphen, "Now Is the Time to Do It," *Let's Clean Up the Ghetto*, vocals by Teddy Pendergrass, Philadelphia International (1977); Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff, "Year of Decision," *Let's Clean Up the Ghetto*, vocals by The Three Degrees, Philadelphia International (1977); Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff, "New Day, New World Comin'," *Let's Clean Up the Ghetto*, vocals by Billy Paul, Philadelphia International (1977); G. Heron, "Save the Children," *Let's Clean Up the Ghetto*, vocals by the Intruders, Philadelphia International (1977).

<sup>76</sup>This commitment is printed on the album jacket.

<sup>77</sup>George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, 145.

<sup>78</sup>For a brief account of the difficulties experienced by many associated with Motown in connection with the move from Detroit to Los Angeles, see Dahl, *Motown: The Golden Years*, 41–43. The case that Gordy's intentions were well known in advance is made in Nelson George's *Where Did Our Love Go?: The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound* (New York, 1985).

<sup>79</sup>Thomas McClary and Lionel Ritchie, "Visions," *Natural High*, vocals by the Commodores, Motown Records (1978).

<sup>80</sup>For a more attenuated description of Funk, see Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 350–357.

<sup>81</sup>While a large number of books have been written about the Black Panthers, the only effort to provide an analytical examination of the U.S. organization is Scot Brown's *Fighting for US, Maulana Karenga, the US Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism* (New York, 2003).

<sup>82</sup>Sylvester Stewart, "Don't Call Me Nigger, Whitey," *Stand!*, vocals by Sly & the Family Stone, Epic Records (1969); "Stand!, Stand!", vocals by Sly & the Family Stone, Epic Records (1969). My thanks to Caryl Sheffield for suggesting these songs.

<sup>83</sup>Sylvester Stewart, "Everyday People," *Stand!*, vocals by Sly & the Family Stone, Epic Records (1969).

<sup>84</sup>Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong, "Cloud Nine," *Cloud Nine*, Gordy (1969); Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong, "Run Away Child, Running Wild," *Cloud Nine*, Gordy (1969).

<sup>85</sup>Norman Whitfield, "Stop the War Now," *Solid Rock* (1972), vocals by the Temptations. This interpretation is presented in "Classic Motown, 1959–1988," <http://classic.motown.com/artist.aspx?ob=ros&src=lb&aid=52>.

<sup>86</sup>For historical family income data see U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Income Tables," table F-7B. <http://www.census.gov/hhes/income/histinc/f07b.html>; For unemployment data, see U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Survey*, <http://data.bls.gov/servlet/SurveyOutputServlet>

<sup>87</sup>Maurice White, "Keep Your Head To the Sky," *Head to the Sky*, vocals by Earth, Wind & Fire, Columbia (1973); Maurice White, Charles Stepney, and Verdine White, "That's the Way of the World," *That's the Way of the World*, Columbia (1975).

<sup>88</sup>For detailed segregation data, see Cutler/Glaeser/Vigdor Segregation Data, <http://trinity.aas.duke.edu/~jvigdor/segregation/>

<sup>89</sup>George Clinton, William Collins, and Bernard Worrell, "Chocolate City," *Chocolate City*, vocals by Parliament, Casablanca (1975).

<sup>90</sup>George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, 155.

- 91 Thomas Poole, "Theological, Moral, and Existential Themes in the Blues," paper presented at the Society of Christian Ethics, Washington, DC, 6 January 1995.
- 92 "BBB Interviews Gil Scott-Heron," *Black Books Bulletin* 6 (No. 3, 1979): 36.
- 93 Langston Hughes, "Letter to the Academy," (1933) in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Volume 1, The Poems: 1921-1940*, ed., Arnold Rampersad (Columbia, MO, 2001), 231-32
- 94 Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson, "The Get Out of the Ghetto Blues," *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, vocals by Gil Scott-Heron. RCA Records (1974).
- 95 Ibid.; Abiodun Oyewole, "When the Revolution Comes," *The Last Poets*, Douglas (1970).
- 96 For a useful discussion of how former President Reagan's social policies disadvantaged African Americans and other similarly situated groups, see John L. Palmer, ed., *Perspectives on the Reagan Years* (Washington, DC, 1986).
- 97 See Cutler/Glaeser/Vigdor Segregation Data, <http://trinity.aas.duke.edu/~jvigdor/segregation/>
- 98 Family income and unemployment data is extracted from U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Income Tables," Table F-7B and *Current Population Survey*.
- 99 Data for admissions to federal and state prisons are taken from various issues of *Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear*, Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.
- 100 Gerry Thomas, "Is This the Future?," *Is This the Future?*, vocals by Fatback, Spring Records (1983).
- 101 Ed Fletcher, Melvin Glover, Sylvia Robinson, and Clifton Chase, "The Message," *The Message*, Sugar Hill Records (1982).
- 102 "Many Ways to Pressure Black Radio," *The Black Commentator*. E-Mailbox, Issue 46, [http://www.blackcommentator.com/46/46\\_email.html](http://www.blackcommentator.com/46/46_email.html)
- 103 Nas, "Black Zombie," *The Lost Tapes*, Sony (2002); Jamiroquai, "Emergency on Planet Earth," *Emergency on Planet Earth*, Sony (1993).
- 104 Michael Franti, "Stay Human (All the Freaky People)," *Stay Human*, Six Degrees (2001).
- 105 Mos Def, "Umi Says," *Black on Both Sides*, Rawkus (2002).
- 106 Tupac Shakur, "Troublesome 96," *Greatest Hits*, Interscope Records (1998).
- 107 N.W.A., "Fuck tha Police," *Straight Outta Compton*, Priority Records (2002).
- 108 Common (featuring the Last Poets), "The Corner," *Be*, Geffen Records (2005).
- 109 Jurassic 5, "Concrete Schoolyard," *EP*, Interscope Records (1997).
- 110 The Coup, "Ride the Fence," *Party Music*, Tommy Boy (2001).
- 111 Nelson George, *Hip Hop America* (New York, 1999).
- 112 KRS-One, former leader of Boogie Down Productions, founded the "Stop the Violence Movement" in 1989 and organized the all-star charity single "Self-Destruction," which raised half a million dollars for the National Urban League in 1989. Russell Simmons is another Hip Hop mogul who is involved in various stop the violence initiatives.
- 113 Russell Simmons and several Hip Hop artists including LL Cool J, Rev. Run, and Jadakiss, are spearheading the "One Mind. One Vote" campaign that has a goal of registering two million voters between the ages of 18 and 34 by the November presidential election and a total of twenty million voters over the next five years. The nonpartisan initiative is reaching out to Hip Hop fans through the syndicated radio show hosted by Doug Banks and through voter registration booths set up on the 2004 Doug Banks Jam Session concert tour.
- 114 Puffy Combs (Bad Boy Records), Damon Dash (Rockefeller Records), Master P (No Limit Records), Jermaine Dupri (So So Def Records), and Dee and Wakym (Ruff Ryders) all donate heavily to charities and have created their own foundations.

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