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Fishbone

**Rock and Roll Apartheid**

[19 October 2005]

by Laina Dawes

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***If hip-hop can be color blind, why do rock concerts still seem segregated?***

Three years ago, in Hamilton, a city an hour north of Toronto, I attended a System of a Down show from which I barely escaped with my life. With racist comments and empty beer bottles thrown at my head by shirtless, drunken fratboys with sunburned necks, I felt as though I had suddenly been transported back in time to the Rolling Stones concert at Altamont, circa 1970, and these were the biker gangs hired for security. It totally destroyed the experience, as I spent more time looking over my shoulder than watching the band.

Still, when System played in Toronto recently with Mars Volta, I got tickets. Why would I want to go again? Well, System's Armenian-infused metal capped with the Puerto Rican prog-rock attack from Mars Volta makes for an irresistibly exciting and unique musical experience. But silly me, I expected the crowd at this show to be a bit more culturally sensitive. Was I ever wrong. It was hard not to let the finger-pointing, comments, dirty looks and the occasional guffaw of laughter deter me from having a good time. People made fun of my afro, even though onstage, the Mars Volta's Cedric Bixler Zavala has one that's much bigger.

Though rock was spawned from blues-influenced music such as that of guitarist Robert Johnson and pianist Chuck Berry, many still resist the picture of a black singer fronting a rock band. Legendary black rock bands such as Mother's Finest and the Family Stand struggled for decades to find and maintain a sold multicultural fan base and, most important, a label willing to promote their music. And as reality television has become increasingly popular over the past few years, it also has brought out the ugly side of *our* reality. When Ty Taylor, the only African-American male on *Rock Star: INXS* made his farewell speech after being voted off the show, he suggested that his race might be a factor in his early dismissal. The response on his website was immediate and disturbing: One person commented, "If slavery still existed, then, yes, I would believe that it was racism." Huh? Was he playing the race card? Oh, no he didn't!

Unlike rock, hip-hop, which began in African American and Latino communities as a way to express truths about their lives in the inner cities, has opened its arms to a universal audience and emerged as a culture to which everyone is invited. White hip-hop producers, such as Scott Storch (Missy Elliot, 50 Cent, The Game) and Houston-based rapper and producer Paul Wall (T.I, Mike Jones) provide beats for black artists who clamor for their skills. And black musicians have always opened their arms to white audiences (we ain't that stupid), whether it be the jazz-era embrace of the elite who would slink up to Harlem, fascinated with the music perceived as risqué, or not beating the crap out of Elvis when he was illogically crowned the King of Rock and Roll.



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According to the Simmons Lathan Media Group, white males between 13 and 35 represent 80 percent of hip-hop record consumers. Presumably the gangsta imagery and the perceived hyper-masculinity in hip-hop provides an escape into an exciting, yet dangerous world. Though these white fans would never be seen on rough streets in the Bronx or travel to the Dirty South and hang out in a fried-chicken shack, the music gives them the power to imagine living a more eventful life than their mundane existence in the suburbs promises. But do we see black musicians and fans excluding them from obtaining their passion for the music, either as artists or simply as concertgoers? No. In fact, a black person at a Roots or Jurassic 5 show is akin to a fly in the buttermilk.

Rock culture is different, but maybe this shouldn't surprise me. After all, rock 'n' roll and its bastardized brother, heavy metal, have always had a silent understanding among their fans. The aggression of the music -- the loud, screeching guitars, pummeling drums and bass -- provides an opportunity for the primarily white male fans to legitimately let loose in a world in which they can shrug off the invisible bonds of societal conformity, if only for a little while. Perhaps it's seen as the last bastion of an all-white all-male form of entertainment -- a place where for years, women were only "allowed" in venues with their respective boyfriends.

The metal community in particular is cultish. According to DePaul sociology professor Deena Weinstein, who has written extensively on the history of rock and metal, race is supposedly not a factor in the metal community, simply because fewer people (75.3 million metal records were sold in 2004, compared to 132.5 million hip-hop albums) are as interested in the genre as much as pop and rock. A die-hard metal fan is hard to find. If you show up regularly at concerts and support bands by buying CDs in this era of computer-manufactured music, you are supposedly welcomed in. But having attending rock, metal and punk shows for almost 15 years, I know the idea of this utopian fantasy of togetherness based on the love of a particular music is a dream deferred. We cannot and will not pretend that cultural tensions don't exist in the music venue, because as we step outside into the darkened night, we, the brown-skinned people, know that whatever comfort we may have felt in the darkened nightclub, we cannot escape the trials and tribulations of living in an unjust society. That the message board on the website for James Spooner's *Afropunk*, a documentary on blacks involved in the punk scene, has been hacked by white supremacists at least three times in the past year epitomizes this.

Hip-hop shares many of the characteristics as rock and metal. When rap first emerged, courtesy of Boogie Down Productions, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five and Public Enemy, it too provided listeners with outspoken yet controlled rebelliousness. The struggles of living in a racist and, more important, classist world evoked a shared life story and expressed powerful, no-holds-barred social commentary for those who might have been afraid to utter such sentiments in their daily lives. Though the music emerged from the streets via those marginalized in society, hip-hop and its culture remained open to anyone who was down with its messages. As inner cities are multiracial, it was no surprise that other marginalized communities participated. But when suburban kids drawn in by the fantasies that emerged from gangsta rap started buying records and money started rolling in, the major labels started to take more notice, providing large marketing budgets to pander to an audience they originally didn't think would be interested in urban music.

The past decade has seen an economic boom within hip-hop culture. Because of their typically higher level of income, middle-class whites drive record sales and financially support hip-hop culture. But the contingent with the most money dictates who they want to see and hear: When the people representing the latest urban fashions are white kids living in suburban homes rather than those struggling in inner cities where hip-hop first began, you know the demographic has shifted. Knowing that a large white audience with money to spend on hip-hop is out there, how can black rock artists hope to maintain their credibility by writing and producing what they want to write instead of sticking to a formula that guarantees instant sales? Black rock musicians such as Martin Luther, Stiffed and Cody Chesnutt will either have to obtain success in the independent scene or downplay their preference for alternative music and, perhaps, their allegiance to their cultural ethnicity to reassure a cautious public.

The black community bears some responsibility for the problem. Somewhere over the past few decades, we have adopted certain music genres and a certain lifestyle as definitive of cultural identity. If you are a metal head, you have just betrayed your race. But to want to appear in an American-style hip-hop video, prancing around half-naked with very little talent and a blond weave, it's okay; you just might be seen as a credit to your country. We celebrate pimping, yet we seem to frown upon artists who want to create music that doesn't fall under the urban

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umbrella.

Urban radio stations, such as Flow 93.5 in Toronto, which needed several years to convince the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission that an urban station in Canada was warranted, have to cater to advertisers interested in reaching only a specific demographic to keep the station afloat. When I talked to a producer for Flow 93.5, he told me the station doesn't play black rock because it confuses advertisers and the 18 to 30 demographic of culturally diverse listeners in Toronto don't request it. Grand Master Flash concurs that black people, unfamiliar with the history of rock, would probably never hear bands like Black Jack Johnson (Mos Def's rock side project) on the urban airwaves. When I ask him if he had any solutions, he replies, "Satellite radio."

Now maybe there isn't a large audience for black rock. And what is black rock, anyway? According to critic Greg Tate, editor of *Everything But the Burden: What White People Are Taking from Black Culture*, bands such as Fishbone and the Family Stand emerged from the post-soul era, infusing the emotion of soul music into a more aggressive, modern-rock sound. Author Mark Anthony Neal wrote in *The Birth of New Blackness*, that the emergence of black rock signified "the conceiving of blackness in the absence of the black racial subject -- what happens to blackness when the need (and desire) to acknowledge the physical presence of black folk is removed." So it is not really about a black face standing in front of a all-white rock crowd, but the freedom to do so without race factoring in to the music they want to perform. And a lot of black fans and musicians play and listen to rock -- just check out *Afropunk* and the community that has emerged from the film's website: frustrated musicians, fans who are being tired of being ridiculed for attending shows because of their ethnicity and, most important, a community of thousands who want to live a punk or rock lifestyle without being unfairly judged because of the color of their skin.

The stories posted on the community message board are as varied as the people who are writing them, from a woman who is looking for fellow black lesbian punk rockers to whether a specific band's music lyrics hold any connotations of racism. Some are lonely and write about being the only black metal head in their rural community, and some are simply looking for a cute punk girl or boy, someone who won't laugh at their musical tastes and lifestyle. But some of the most disturbing posts have included people who, unable to deal with their isolation, are on the brink of suicide. Though it might seem extreme and you may secretly wonder if there are any underlying mental health issues that haven't been addressed, the feeling of not belonging to either the black or white communities is real and can extremely painful and confusing.

In April 2005, I interviewed three young black women who are rabid rock fans. They discussed their friends and family members' reactions to their musical preferences. One of the women grew up in the 1970s and was influenced by the variety of musical genres played in her home at an early age. For her the music was simply an extension of who she was, curious and non-judgmental. Many within the black community in Canada are first- and second-generation Canadians from the Caribbean; they are puzzled at such musical preferences, labeling them 'whitewashed,' and perceive a preference for rock rather than reggae or calypso as a slight somehow to their entire heritage. And while the women I spoke to had all attended several rock and metal concerts, they all couldn't help but notice the stares, and each admitted to making a silent headcount of other black attendees, if they could spot any.

There are no logical reasons for musical segregation to continue, yet it does. We continue to survive in a world that, unfortunately, thrives on segregation in regard to gender, class and ethnicity. Music conjures up serious emotions, so it's no wonder it remains a cultural battleground. Ideally, to claim that a musical genre is class- or race-specific and thereby set up roadblocks for others to participate as musicians and fans should be a fruitless attempt to maintain or gain power. It ignores the reality that music is accessible to us all. Damn it, I paid for my concert ticket. I'm going!

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