New book delves into race and rock 'n' roll

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In 1967, Ralph Gleason, the music critic of The San Francisco Chronicle (and soon to become a founding editor of Rolling Stone magazine), celebrated rock 'n' roll for banishing African-American influences.

"Remarkably free from prejudice," Gleason wrote, singers, songwriters, session musicians, producers were neither "ashamed of being white" nor attempting to become part of Negro culture.

For the first time in decades, Gleason declared, "something important and new is happening artistically and musically in this society that is distinct from the Negro and to which the Negro will have to come, if he is interested in it at all."

Shift explained

By 1970, Jack Hamilton, a professor of American Studies and Media Studies at the University of Virginia, reminds us, rock 'n' roll was becoming rock, with "black music" set apart from "white music."

In "Just About Midnight," Hamilton provides a provocative explanation of this shift. Rock music, he argues, was built "on an ideology of authenticity" based on notions of individual genius, personal expression, and political rebellion. Rockers proclaimed their "affinity for and indebtedness to black musical forms," but set them in the past, relegating them to "source material," while constructing "an ideal increasingly defined by an exclusionary white masculinity."

And critics pilloried black artists for succumbing to commerce and abandoning the authentic musical traditions of their race, including gospel and the blues.

An interracial enterprise

Hamilton’s use of the language of academic literary and music criticism does not always keep his analysis "legible and lively for non-specialists." And, at times, he pushes his thesis harder than the evidence warrants.

That said, "Just About Midnight" provides a fresh and often fascinating revisionist history.

To illuminate the interplay of rock music and racial thought and document "the web of commonality" that refutes "racially hermetic discourses," Hamilton juxtaposes performers who are rarely compared with and contrasted to one another: Sam Cooke with Bob Dylan; the Beatles with Motown, Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder; Aretha Franklin with Janis Joplin and Dusty Springfield; Jimi Hendrix with Mick Jagger. His analysis demonstrates that rock was, inevitably and indubitably, an interracial enterprise.

‘Pop,’ not ‘white’

Hamilton emphasizes, for example, that Bob Dylan "heard himself in conversation" with Little Richard and Chuck Berry. And that, although Sam Cooke was dismissed for selling out, "A Change is Gonna Come" may well exceed "Blowin in the Wind" in political power.

Although the Beatles "made it all right to be white," Hamilton reveals that the Fab Four had "a long and vital
relationship" with Motown, whose founder, Berry Gordy, has been derided for diluting Black music for the market, but whose "signature accomplishment" was a steadfast refusal to accept the equation of "pop" with "white."

A "tragically unintended consequence" of anointing Aretha Franklin as "the Queen of Soul," Hamilton writes, was that it pushed African-American performers even further from the rock ‘n’ roll mainstream they "had helped create and sustain."

‘Never fully heard’

According to Hamilton, Jimi Hendrix became the exception who proved the rule: the essential whiteness of hard rock and heavy metal. And he contends that the Rolling Stones’ insistence on the contemporary relevance of Black music to rock ‘n’ roll "was never fully heard."

None of his artists, Hamilton concludes, ever set out to make music that was "white." They recognized their debt to the great African-American gospel and rhythm and blues artists.

But throughout the 1970s and beyond rock became suffused with musical violence, "just another marker of white male hegemony," with little or no political or imaginative purpose. And rock’s ideology of white authenticity, Hamilton claims, took its power "precisely from the fact that it conceals and outwardly denies its existence."

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