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The Unacknowledged Economic and Political Forces Which Shaped the Rise of Rock and Roll

As someone who has taught a course called “From Rock and Roll to Hip Hop” for sixteen years, I have been frustrated by the absence of an historically grounded, nuanced, explanation for the rise of Rock and Roll comparable to the one we have for the origins of hip hop.

Every historian of the subject agrees that Rock and Roll arose, during the early 1950's, when a variety of figures in the music industry, mostly in small record companies and local market radio stations, noticed that white youth were buying rhythm and blues records that had originally been targeted for an all black market, and decided that giving a non-racial label to the music could lead to a vastly expanded market and far greater profits. They were able to do this, historians argue, because of a post war prosperity that put disposable income in the hands of (mostly white) adolescents, allowing them to emerge for the first time in US history as a “teenage consumer market” to which an exciting, and rebellious form of popular music could be marketed and sold. In doing this, the DJ's, record company entrepreneurs and concert promoters who were the formative figures in the rise of Rock and Roll- the Allan Freed's and Sam Phillips's of the world- ended up crossing racial barriers with deep roots in American culture and history, provoking an angry reaction not only from segregationists and white supremacists, but from a cross section of political and religious leaders who felt the music undermined important moral standards. Rock and Roll, which began as a marketing innovation, ended up subverting racial norms and undermining racial barriers, at a time when a powerful Civil Rights movement was beginning to form that would challenge legal and ultimately end legal segregation, and restore voting rights to Black Americans in all Southern states. Although the music itself never discussed political themes, and rarely if ever mentioned race, promotional strategies that put Black and white artists on the same stage, and had black and white young people dancing in the same venues proved revolutionary in terms of US race relations and helped create an implicit level of support for an integrated society that the Civil Rights movement was able to build on in the 1960's.

This narrative of Rock and Roll History appears in almost every work on the subject. However, one piece of this historical puzzle is almost never discussed- how is it that music targeted to perhaps the most stigmatized and discriminated against group in the nation- African Americans- could have such a market presence on the airwaves that it influence the musical tastes of white youth all over the country- from LA to Chicago to Philadelphia and New York. How did it come to pass that radio shows targeting black audiences could be found in almost every city in the country, that numerous small record companies made a living recording black artists and that their records were found in small specialty record shops in almost every Black urban neighborhood? How was it that African American communities were able to support so many talented professional musicians, who were not only able to make a living performing, but were able to get income from the sale of records they made?

To understand this part of the story, we have to look at how and why Black urban communities in the middle and late 1940's had enough earning potential to support such a vibrant musical culture. And to do this, we have to examine a unique combination of migration patterns, shifts in employment and civil rights gains which led per capita income among Blacks to rise markedly

from 1940-1950, not only absolutely, but relative to whites (Note: Black per capita income was 44 percent of the white total in 1940, it was 57 percent in 1950). In a strictly economic sense, the 1940's were a period of remarkable economic progress for African Americans, even though deeply rooted patterns of discrimination in the economy, as well as the society, remained intact.

Some of the rise in earning capacity was a result of migration alone, migration from South to North, from farm to city. Between 1940 and 1950, over 2 million Black people left the rural south for either Southern or northern cities, moving from a low wage or debt peonage economy, to a wage economy where incomes were far higher. And while some of these jobs were in the domestic service occupations within which Black had been trapped for much of US history, a growing number were in factories and the transportation sector where a wartime labor shortage had opened opportunities. All over the country, black men and women could be found in steel mills and auto plants, in factories making tires and electronic equipment, working in mines, and driving buses and trucks. Many of these occupations, especially in the North, Midwest and West, were unionized, giving black workers enough income to leave disposable funds for entertainment after basic necessities were cared for. This unionized black working class provided a major audience for the burgeoning rhythm and blues market that exploded during the 1940's, but they also provided an audience for gospel and jazz. By the late 1940's, every Black urban community in the northeast, Midwest and West had an array of clubs in predominately black neighborhoods where black musicians performed, and more than a few had theaters where hundreds, even thousands of people could gather. In the Morrisania section of the Bronx, an emerging Black community which I have studied closely, more than 7 music clubs catering to Black audiences opened between 1945 and 1955 as the community became predominantly black; while a local theater holding 2,000 people, the Hunts Point Palace, started featuring black artists. The same pattern could be found in Buffalo, Atlantic City, Chicago, Baltimore, Los Angeles, and a score of other cities, providing the basis for a national touring experience for Black artists known as the "Chitlin Circuit."

This emerging and extraordinarily vital musical culture, which few whites other than music entrepreneurs knew about, would provide the musical roots for the Rock and Roll explosion. But its emergence was not just a result of war time prosperity, It also reflected a generation of black activism and civil rights victories which preceded the much more visible and publicized Civil Rights Revolution of the 1960's This activism, a response to Depression conditions which pushed most Blacks into extreme poverty took to forms- a "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work campaign" led largely by Black nationalists that aimed at forcing stores in Black communities to hire black workers as sales people; and a campaign led by Communists to end discrimination in the labor movement, in government employment, and in the nation's largest employers. By the time World War 2 had started, both of these campaigns had made significant gains- storeowners in black communities in Norther cities began to hire black workers, a major breakthrough came in the labor movement when the Congress of Industrial Organizations, founded in 1935, decided to organize basic industry on a non-discriminatory basis, bringing that interracial organizing strategy to successful campaigns to unionize the steel auto and electrical industries. Sometimes, collaboration between the labor movement and Black activists yielded major employment breakthroughs in public utilities, such as when the Transport Workers Union and Rev Adam Clayton Powell collaborated in opening jobs for blacks as drivers and motormen in the New York City Transit System. When the economy finally revived with onset of World War 2, Black people in the

Northeast, Midwest and West had access to hundreds of thousands, and eventually millions of jobs in basic industry and public utilities and paid much higher wages than they had ever had access to in the past.

This accumulation of Depression Era victories was magnified by the March on Washington Movement led by A Phillip Randolph in 1941, which threatened to bring hundreds of thousands of angry black people to Washington if the President didn't integrate the armed forces and ban discrimination in defense industry. President Roosevelt didn't integrate the military, but he did issue a proclamation banning discrimination in defense industries, and setting up a commission to oversee the new policies. As a result of this proclamation, Black men and women were able to find jobs all over the country, mostly outside of the South in shipbuilding, aircraft production and the manufactures of armored vehicles and weapons, almost all of them unionized and paying much higher wages than they ever had access to. Not only did the Black population in Northern cities grow rapidly as a result of Black migrants coming to take these jobs, such cities now contained a critical mass of black people with incomes sufficient to become music consumers, transforming into incubators of musical creativity in genres ranging from blues, to jazz, to gospel, to jump blues and urban harmonic singing.

It is this emerging black consumer market that led radio stations in almost every city to organize music programming aimed a Black audience and small storefront record companies to record black artists who had demonstrated popular appeal. And while the clubs and theaters in Black neighborhoods attracted relatively few whites, some Black musicians whose songs were played on the radio started to attract young white listeners, some of whom actually went to record stores in Black neighborhoods to purchase songs they liked. These artists, some of whom offered romantic harmonies (Sonny Till and the Orioles) others who performed hard driving dance numbers (Louis Jordan, Big Joe Turner) others who offered racy lyrics and an eroticized persona(Ruth Bronx, Hand Ballard, The Dominoes) became the core performers in the early Rock and Roll Shows offered by promoters like Allen Freed to take advantage of the new white youth market. They would soon be joined by people like Chuck Berry, Little Richard and Elvis Presley who would do more to define the new genre

But without all the cultural political and economic changes that allowed Black communities to become incubators of commercial music, Rock and Roll would have never arisen, much less arisen at the time that it did.

The 1940's is when these changes took place, deserves more attention from historians as signal moment in the emergence of modern African- American politics and culture, and a time when profound racial changes began to take place in a society where discrimination and white supremacy were almost as powerfully entrenched in the North as the South.