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Why Black History is YOUR History: Three Black Songwriters Who Left an Indelible Impact on Every American Teenager

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Why Black History is YOUR History: Three Black Songwriters Who Left an Indelible Impact on Every American Teenager by Mark Naison

At a time when Black History is under attack in Florida and around the nation, it is important to remind people that the history being suppressed is one that every person in this country has a stake in because it helps explain who they are

This is especially true of the Baby Boomer generation, whose formative experience in their youth was the explosion of a new form of music which separated them decisively from their parents and everyone who came before them- Rock and Roll.

Rock and Roll, which swept through the airwaves in the mid 50's, represented an alternative way of life for the first generation of young people who had enough disposable income to become defined as a separate consumer market, with their own lifestyle and musical tastes.

Not only were Black performers central in creating the musical form they embraced, but Black songwriters helped create the unique narrative that validated teenage experience in the United States

Their influence was so great that everyone who lived through that time uses their songs as markers of their emerging identities, especially when it came to love, romance, and teenage rebellion against adult authority

Since I have never seen these three artists analyzed together, because their musical styles were so different, I would like to look at Chuck Berry, Sam Cooke, and Smokey Robinson, not through the music they performed, but the way their songs created a master narrative of teenage life in the United States from the mid 1950's through the mid 1960's.

Let's first look at Chuck Berry. In the mid 1950's, when Rock and Roll was under attack for smashing racial boundaries and threatening gender norms, Berry wrote songs, consciously directed at a largely white audience, which validated young people's attachment to this new, highly controversial musical form.

Take a look at the lyrics one of Berry's Signature songs, covered by the Beatles, "Roll Over Beethoven". It is a defense of the entire culture of Rock and Roll, from the DJ's to the dance floor, as well as a defiant claim for the music's validity

"Well, I'ma write a little letter
I'm gonna mail it to my local DJ
Yeah, it's a jumping little record
I want my jockey to play
Roll over Beethoven, I gotta hear it again today
You know my temperature's rising
The jukebox blowing a fuse
My heart's beating rhythm
And my soul keep a-singing the blues
Roll over Beethoven

Tell Tchaikovsky the news
Well, if you feel and like it
Go get your lover, reel and rock it
Roll it over then move on up just
A trifle further and reel and rock with one another"

Here is a black songwriter, never mentioning race, who validates a fierce challenge to their parents generation on the part of young whites around the country

Berry does the same thing in "Sweet Little Sixteen" a song which sees the Rock and Roll revolution sweeping the country through the eyes of a 16 year old girl, presumably white, trying to persuade her parents to allow her to listen to and dance to this new and controversial music

They're really rockin' in Boston
In Pittsburgh, P.A.
Deep in the heart of Texas
And 'round the Frisco Bay
All over St. Louis
And down in New Orleans
All the cats are gonna dance with
Sweet Little Sixteen
Sweet Little Sixteen
She's just got to have
About half a million
Framed autographs
Her wallet's filled with pictures
She gets 'em one by one
Become so excited
Watch her look at her run, boy
Oh, mommy, mommy
Please, may I go?
It's such a sight to see
Somebody steal the show
Oh, daddy, daddy
I beg of you
Whisper to mommy
It's all right with you

Every Baby Boomer knows the words to these songs, and sees them as integral in their own connection to Rock and Roll. Few connect them to Black history or Black life in America

An almost equal contribution to the sound track of the Baby Boomer generation was provided by Sam Cooke, an african american singer/songwriter who became a major figure in Rock and Roll when Elvis and Chuck Berry were pushed aside because their performances were too controversial. Cooke also wrote songs designed to appeal to a mass, largely white, teenage audience by seeing the world from their point of view. No better example of this

is his song "Wonderful World" which every baby boomer knows the words of

Don't know much about history
Don't know much biology
Don't know much about a science book
Don't know much about the French I took

But I do know that I love you
And I know that if you love me, too
What a wonderful world this would be

Don't know much about geography
Don't know much trigonometry
Don't know much about algebra
Don't know what a slide rule is for

But I do know one and one is two
And if this one could be with you
What a wonderful world this would be

Cooke wrote other songs which embraced the mainstream teenage experience such as "Everybody loves to Cha Cha Cha" and "Cupid," Though today he is best remembered for a song about race- "A Change is Gonna Come," during the bulk of his time as a pop singer, he was writing anthems for a youth audience coming of age and trying to navigate the experience of love and romance

The final black songwriter who helped leave an indelible mark on teenage life and experience in the United States is William "Smokey" Robinson, who wrote hundreds of songs for himself and other artists on the Motown Label. While some of his best love songs-"You Really Got a Hold on Me" "Tracks of My Tears"- were ones he recorded himself, the best know song he wrote "My Girl" performed by the Temptations, became the closest thing to a teenage anthem we have for early and mid-60s.Do any of you know a Baby Boomer who doesn't know these words?

I've got sunshine on a cloudy day
When it's cold outside
I've got the month of May
I guess you'd say
What can make me feel this way
My girl, my girl, my girl
Talkin' 'bout my girl
My girl
I've got so much honey
The bees envy me
I've got a sweeter song
Than the birds in the trees

Well, I guess you'd say
What can make me feel this way
My girl, my girl, my girl
Talkin' 'bout my girl
My girl

None of the songs whose lyrics I have quoted from mention race. They invoke a narrative about teenage rebellion, teenage joy, and teenage love which almost everyone in my generation embraced

And every single one of them was written by a Black songwriter.

I hope we can talk about this, and teach about this, in every state in the union