“This Music Begins on the Auction Block”: Learning in the Twenty-First Century from James Baldwin on Music

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Abstract

One theme in James Baldwin’s work that has gained increasing attention in the last quarter-century is music. What has been missing from this discussion, however, has been a thematic survey of Baldwin’s writing on music and its implications for the twenty-first century. This article focuses on select music-centered texts to examine what Baldwin’s ideas about music reveal about history in our own times. Multiple themes in his writing show how racial slavery creates—in the present tense—differences in experiences and musical expression between people constructed as Black and as white. Baldwin’s writing illuminates the significance of racial slavery in American music history even beyond genres associated with Black Americans.

Keywords: American music, Black American music, slavery, race, Baldwin criticism
It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story. It is a story which otherwise has yet to be told and which no American is prepared to hear.

James Baldwin, “Many Thousands Gone”

A Black, gay intellectual and activist who did not adhere to one ideology, James Baldwin, born nearly a century ago, is a singularly important author for our contemporary world. Baldwin’s grasp of his times was exceptional—and exceptionally prophetic. In our current era, after events like the many police murders of Black Americans, the racist Trump presidency, and the advent of the Black Lives Matter movement, many social media posts, articles, and books, as well as Raoul Peck’s acclaimed 2016 documentary, *I Am Not Your Negro*, have reinvigorated the public’s interest in Baldwin’s work. One theme in his work that is gaining increasing attention is music.

In his 1964 essay “The Uses of the Blues,” Baldwin writes, “I don’t know anything about music,” but of course he was being facetious, as literary historian Radiclani Clytus notes. Though many have written about music in Baldwin’s short story “Sonny’s Blues,” a small but growing number of scholars have tackled Baldwin’s greater body of writing about music, writing articles and book chapters in the last quarter-century about music in Baldwin’s work overall. Josh Kun’s essay, “Life According to the Beat: James Baldwin, Bessie Smith, and the Perilous Sounds of Love,” from the 1999 collection *James Baldwin Now*, examines the role of blues giant Bessie Smith in Baldwin’s work, focusing on a reading of Baldwin’s 1962 novel, *Another Country*, and asks critical questions about Baldwin as listener. In the 2009 volume *A Historical Guide to James Baldwin*, D. Quentin Miller’s chapter “Using the Blues: James Baldwin and Music” finds patterns in representations of gospel, jazz, blues, and classical music in Baldwin’s fiction. Emily J. Lordi analyzes the role of soul music in Baldwin’s work and of the concept of soul, which she defines in terms of resilience in the face of struggle in her 2020 book, *The Meaning of Soul: Black Music and Resilience since the 1960s*. The most thorough treatment of Baldwin’s oeuvre in relation to music is Ed Pavlić’s 2016 book, *Who Can Afford to Improvise? James Baldwin and Black Music, the Lyric and the Listeners*. Pavlić admirably applies a musical and lyrical lens to Baldwin’s entire body of work, rather than only to works focusing on music, and relates this interpretation to the twenty-first century, including the music of Amy Winehouse. What has been missing from these discussions, however, has been a thematic survey of Baldwin’s writing on music and its implications for the twenty-first century. For this article, I focus on select music-centered texts to examine what Baldwin’s ideas about music reveal about history in our own times. Though I mostly discuss nonfiction, Baldwin’s 1957 short story “Sonny’s Blues” proves pertinent for my analysis.

In his writing, including about music, Baldwin highlights a crucial paradox: the simultaneous construction of race and the lived consequences of this construction. In other words, Baldwin critiques race as a made-up concept while acknowledging
its resultant different realities for whites and people of color, especially Black Americans. He does not pretend to be “colorblind,” as he knows that ignoring race and racism would not solve anything, but his relentless inquiries into and critiques of white supremacy and its ongoing significance make it clear that his prescience regarding today’s reality and his forward-thinking insight into what would become our world are most unusual.

From reading the Baldwin anthologies Collected Essays (1998) and The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings (2010), I became aware of multiple themes in Baldwin’s music-centered texts. These themes reveal his acknowledgment and refutation of the concept of race by showing how racial slavery creates—in the present tense—differences in experiences and musical expression between people constructed as Black and as white. Themes that highlight his points about race include the roots of music, music’s reflection of specific attitudes, and interpretations of music and its meanings. Baldwin makes the significance of the history undergirding these themes clear and how that history begins for Black American music with American racial slavery. Baldwin’s writing illuminates the significance of racial slavery in American music history, even beyond genres associated with Black Americans.

When discussing Baldwin’s career and music-centered writing, it is important to view his work as an interconnected body that is dynamic and evolving. Many critics, including Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Julius Lester, have negatively distinguished between Baldwin’s earlier and later periods, arguing, for example, that his later work is simplistic in ways that his early nonfiction is not. Thankfully, Eddie S. Glaude Jr.’s 2020 book, Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own, has helped many to reevaluate Baldwin’s later work, especially works like No Name in the Street, which Gates and Lester dismissed and which Glaude highlights as more importantly political than Baldwin’s earlier, canonized work.

Though I agree with Glaude, I view Baldwin’s decades of work as one body because of the consistent quality of his writing—editor Randall Kenan notes the quality of Baldwin’s sentences in his introduction to the Baldwin compendium The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings—and his carefully considered perspectives. In that vein, Baldwin’s texts of different periods comment on each other’s ideas, regardless of chronology. As Baldwin argued, American racial slavery is not the aberration in US history that many assume it is. As historian David R. Roediger summarizes in How Race Survived U.S. History, scholars like W. E. B. Du Bois argued that the system of capture and the forced transatlantic movement of Black bodies from different regions of Africa to the “New World” created the modern system of white supremacy. This argument means that such a system created whiteness and Blackness as we think of them today—that no such institutionalized distinction existed before the seventeenth century.

In his 1984 essay “On Being ‘White’ … and Other Lies,” published in Essence magazine and later collected in Roediger’s edited anthology Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to be White, Baldwin writes, “No one was white before
he/she came to America.” Roediger’s introduction to Black on White argues that Baldwin was “[p]erhaps overdrawing a point, in that imperial expansion and the slave trade made race resonate globally,” but the argument was still “a useful provocation illuminating U.S. peculiarities.” To Baldwin, many groups, including the Irish, Italian, and Jewish populations that came to the US, became white in ways that they could not in their homelands—after distancing themselves from Blacks. The United States’ dependence on racial slavery, and the different forms of controlling Black labor since its nominal abolition, make it clear that people of different ethnicities benefited—and still benefit—from what historian George Lipsitz calls “the possessive investment in whiteness” and its other side, the oppression of people of color.

That duality, the coexistence of slavery and freedom, of oppression and privilege, has been called “the central paradox of American history” by historian Edmund S. Morgan. Morgan convincingly shows how the enslavement of one group depended on the freedom of another and vice versa. As Roediger discusses in How Race Survived U.S. History, before the advent of racial slavery and events like Bacon’s Rebellion and a 1691 law against interracial sex—the first law in Virginia using “white” to describe people—race was not a viable concept or institution. Therefore, whiteness, Blackness, race, and racism are relatively recent historical constructions. In addition, a racial system of control and coercive labor did not end with the Emancipation Proclamation or Juneteenth: the convict lease system, sharecropping and its resultant cycles of debt, lynching, Jim Crow segregation, and contemporary mass incarceration all exist as racialized forms of controlling Black bodies and Black labor.

Some point out that there were whites who had been enslaved in the same system, but whites were not enslaved en masse based on their perceived skin color the way that Blacks were—and continue to be. Furthermore, today whites do not live with the same experience, or legacy, of slavery: commensurate with Morgan’s argument, the legacy of that system for whites is of racial freedom, whereas for Blacks it is of racial slavery. That is not to argue that whites do not suffer, but racial oppression is not one of the reasons why they suffer.

The creation of whiteness and Blackness affected music. Baldwin understood that Black experiences in the “New World” led to the creation of genres like jazz. His 1979 essay, “Of the Sorrow Songs: The Cross of Redemption,” starts as a review of critic James Lincoln Collier’s 1978 book, The Making of Jazz, and at the essay’s end, Baldwin explicitly addresses the salience of slavery in the roots of Black American music history. Baldwin writes, “Life comes out of music, and music comes out of life: without trusting the first, it is impossible to create the second.” Here he argues that the relationship of music and life is reciprocal, that each emerges from the other, but that life experience precedes the making of music, which implies that the experiences of Blacks in America uniquely qualify them to play music that came out of their experiences. As Baldwin soon defines it, that experience starts—and ends—with slavery. He continues, “The rock against which the European notion of the nation-state has crashed is nothing more—and
absolutely nothing less—than the question of identity: *Who am I? And what am I doing here?* For Baldwin, this question—the basis of individual humanity—is opposed to “the European notion of the nation-state,” an idea that was created in this country by Europeans imposing the system of racial slavery on Blacks transported from Africa. To Baldwin, the emergence of humanity, life, and music from this system has been a credit to Black Americans under the colossal weight of cruelty and oppression: a towering achievement that threatens to destroy the primacy of countries and nation-states over the rights of individuals and groups. Therefore, for Baldwin, Black resistance to white systems of domination creates this music. Baldwin also writes, “The music began in captivity, and is still, absolutely, created in captivity,” arguing that the system of racial slavery did not end with Emancipation and does not end with what gets called the civil rights movement, which he called a “slave rebellion” in “On Language, Race, and the Black Writer.” At the climax of “Of the Sorrow Songs,” at a feverish pitch of intersecting ideas, Baldwin states, “It is out of this, and much more than this, that black American music springs. This music begins on the auction block.” In an essay that started as a review of a book about jazz, Baldwin claims that jazz is part of a much larger tradition of “black American music,” all of which “springs” from “the auction block.”

It is significant that Baldwin uses a symbol of racial slavery as a beginning from which Black American music emerges. Again, Baldwin is arguing that racial slavery never ended: claiming that Black American music “begins on the auction block” in the present tense is a crucial move that asserts the primacy of racial slavery in the lives of Black Americans in the twentieth century and beyond.

Why does Baldwin use the auction block as his symbol of choice and not, for example, the capture of Blacks in Africa or the journey to the Americas on the Middle Passage? The auction block is the site of the commercial sale of enslaved people in the “New World,” the site where people became property. This experience, Baldwin argues, is the genesis of the conditions that give rise to Black American music, including jazz. The people profiting from the sale of Black bodies as property clearly had a different experience than those being sold, and this experience, too, informs the dissemination, consumption, and reception of Black American music—and bodies.

In her groundbreaking 2017 history of sex and American music, critic Ann Powers writes in the book’s epilogue that today’s Black Lives Matter movement could be called “Black Bodies Matter,” especially given the epidemic of police brutality against Black people in this country. Given the role of music in the BLM movement, Power’s argument once again reinforces the idea that music, sex, and race are bound together in this country’s history, with the commercial point of sale for Black bodies and music often pandering to the deepest white supremacist fantasies of what blackness is during and after the official period of slavery in this country.

Baldwin’s point also suggests that Black music specifically comes from bodies constructed as Black at sites of commercial sale, specifically the auction block. In
other words, Baldwin may be suggesting that Black American music can only come from Black American bodies and Black American experiences, a correlation Karl Hagstrom Miller relates to the folkloric paradigm in his 2010 book, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow.* Before the rise of this paradigm in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Hagstrom Miller argues, the minstrelsy paradigm allowing whites to impersonate Black people in commercial performance was dominant, so the folkloric paradigm led to the process in the title of his book: music developed a color line whereby Black people were expected to perform genres like the blues and jazz and white people were expected to perform genres like country and American folk music, regardless of the often Black roots of such genres.

Though Hagstrom Miller critiques this paradigm and some of its consequences in his book, Baldwin's point is correct, though as Wesley Morris notes in his chapter on music in the recent book *The 1619 Project* (2021), the legacy of slavery in music is a tangled web in which it can be difficult to reduce what pure Blackness or whiteness is—because there is no such thing, as Baldwin would note. Nonetheless, Baldwin would argue, those constructed as Black in our society have a unique right to call this music theirs.

Baldwin also shows that the attitudes reflected in the music are rooted in Black experiences in racial slavery. In his 1964 essay “The Uses of the Blues,” Baldwin argues that Black acceptance of circumstances, rather than white denial of such conditions, leads to change and the creation of great music. He writes, “And I want to suggest that the acceptance of this anguish one finds in the blues, and the expression of it, creates also, however odd this may sound, a kind of joy.” Here Baldwin points, as he does in “Of the Sorrow Songs,” to Black Americans as the owners and creators of musical forms like the blues, though again, in “The Uses of the Blues,” he demurely claims, “I don't know anything about music.” He is arguing for life experience and cultural context, rather than isolated musical sounds or individual inspiration, as primary factors that determine the creation of music.

While that sentence about acceptance might not immediately suggest a linkage to past and present slavery, the sentence does when read in relation to a passage in his 1963 book *The Fire Next Time*, in the essay “Down at the Cross.” In this passage, he argues that Blacks experience a feeling of genuine freedom in a way that, ironically, whites cannot:

> We had the liquor, the chicken, the music, and each other, and had no need to pretend to be what we were not. This is the freedom that one hears in some gospel songs, for example, and in jazz. In all jazz, and especially in the blues, there is something tart and ironic, authoritative and double-edged. White Americans seem to feel that happy songs are happy and sad songs are sad, and that, God help us, is exactly the way most white Americans sing them—sounding, in both cases, so helplessly, defenselessly fatuous that one dare not speculate on the temperature of the deep freeze from which issue their brave and sexless little voices. Only people who have been 'down the line,' as the song puts it, know what this music is about.
The freedom that he says Black people feel when they can be themselves without the constraints of a larger culture is connected to the acceptance of surrounding circumstances, including of slavery, and to the “double-edged” content of jazz and blues music. Many scholars—including Samuel A. Floyd Jr., Portia K. Maultsby, Lawrence W. Levine, and Craig Werner—have argued that double meanings, irony, and satire have existed in Black American music throughout its history, and Baldwin points to a difference in interpretation of songs, regardless of who writes them, between white and Black musicians.31

Baldwin sees various groups’ interpretations of the music and its meanings as based in differing experiences throughout the history of racial slavery. Again, he believes that Blacks experience a feeling of freedom—dependence from a larger system of degradation and oppression—in ways that whites do not because whites are tied to this system in a different way than Blacks. In another text, Baldwin expands on this idea:

American slavery had two faces and still has two faces. One of them is visible, and that's my face, because the Americans imagine that I am their slave, but that other face is your face and that's the keystone to American slavery: what is happening to you. Now, it's not a matter of your fighting for my liberty, it's a matter of your contending with your parents, with your leaders for your life!32

Baldwin views this feeling of freedom as key to life and to music—and, going back to his arguments in “Of the Sorrow Songs” and “The Uses of the Blues,” confronting and accepting “the auction block” is key to this life and music. Baldwin clearly believes that denying and ignoring the problems of slavery and racism do nothing to change them.

Interpretation of Black American music becomes a recurrent theme in Baldwin’s essays and his short story, “Sonny's Blues.” Baldwin comments in “Sermons and Blues,” a 1959 review of a collection of Langston Hughes poems:

As the white world takes over this vocabulary—without the faintest notion of what it really means—the vocabulary is forced to change. The same thing is true of Negro music, which has had to become more and more complex in order to continue to express any of the private or collective experience.33

This relates to the passage in The Fire Next Time because when Baldwin says, “Only people who have been ‘down the line,’ as the song puts it, know what this music is about,” he is referring to the increasing complexity of Black American music, becoming illegible to whites “in order to continue to express any of the private or collective experience” of Blacks in this country, making misinterpretation of the music increasingly common.

In “Last of the Great Masters,” a 1977 review of a book about jazz piano great Earl Hines, Baldwin designates Black music as distinctively American, arguing:
The men and women in this book were creating the only musical vocabulary this country has. They were creating American classical music. There isn't any other, and the American attempts to deny this have led, among other disasters, to the melancholy rise and fall of the late Elvis Presley, who was so highly paid for having a black sound in a white body. Utter madness, of course, but it does a lot to illuminate the economic situation of black musicians, who have, alas, black sounds in black bodies.34

From reading his argument in “Of the Sorrow Songs,” it is clear that Baldwin views jazz as of a larger Black American musical tradition; therefore, when he writes of jazz musicians creating “American classical music,” he is not speaking only of jazz; like W. E. B. Du Bois writing about spirituals in The Souls of Black Folk in 1903, Baldwin is arguing that Black Americans have created a larger tradition that is original to America in a way that other traditions are not.35 He cites Elvis Presley’s appropriation of “a black sound in a white body” as evidence that “the American attempts to deny this” have led to creating something supposedly original and instead derivative of Black American music and lives.

As D. Quentin Miller notes in his chapter on Baldwin and music in A Historical Guide to James Baldwin, one way that Baldwin showed his love of music was in the frequency of musician characters in his fiction, including novels like Another Country.36 The most famous example is in his short story “Sonny’s Blues,” originally published in 1957. The title character is a Black jazz musician arrested for using heroin, and his unnamed brother, admittedly oblivious to what music means to Sonny, narrates the story. In a key passage, the narrator laments that most people misunderstand music:

All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it. And even then, on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations. But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air. What is evoked in him, then, is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant, too, for that same reason. And his triumph, when he triumphs, is ours.37

Although the narrator knows less about music than Baldwin (despite Baldwin's claim in “The Uses of the Blues”), Baldwin writes this passage as if the narrator is stumbling upon a great truth. Indeed, Baldwin's claims in The Fire Next Time and “Of the Sorrow Songs” show that he agrees with the narrator that “not many people ever really hear it.” The narrator, however, is Black, so the passage reveals that, to Baldwin, whites are not the only people who misunderstand music, including Black American music.

Like Ralph Ellison’s nameless narrator in Invisible Man, published in 1952, the narrator of “Sonny’s Blues” believes that music is deeply misunderstood by the dominant white capitalist culture: Ellison’s narrator asserts, “I know now that few really listen to this music,” while Baldwin’s narrator argues similarly in the above
passage. That both narrators assert this point as a form of certitude (“I know,” both write) suggests that this is a particularly strong conviction for the texts’ authors, regardless of the level of identification Ellison and Baldwin hold with their narrators. In the above passage Baldwin writes that music, specifically jazz and other Black American forms, is both social and individual in its meanings, and like his argument in “Sermons and Blues,” the music becomes more complex from the musicians, and to the listeners, when those “personal, private, vanishing evocations” become more than abstractions: something personally “evoked in” the musicians becomes harder to decipher and more important to express “because it has no words” which makes it “triumphant, too.” When Baldwin writes that “his triumph, when he triumphs, is ours,” he is writing of a racial “ours”—the triumph is of an instrumental utterance being understood in its complexity by others, and as Baldwin argues in The Fire Next Time and elsewhere, not everyone understands this music.

Recorded misinterpretations of Black American music go at least as far back as the mid-nineteenth century, for example in Frederick Douglass’s Narrative from 1845, when Douglass describes whites misunderstanding spirituals (sorrow songs) as evidence that Blacks were happy being enslaved. Many Black American authors and critics in the decades and centuries since, including Amiri Baraka, Nelson George, and Tricia Rose, have written about white misinterpretations of Black American music, including jazz, R & B, and hip-hop.

Baldwin stresses in multiple places the importance of hearing, as seen in the above passage from “Sonny’s Blues” and in “The Price of the Ticket” from 1985, where he writes of his relationship with the painter Beauford Delaney:

I walked into music. I had grown up with music, but, now, on Beauford’s small black record player, I began to hear what I had never dared or been able to hear. Beauford never gave me any lectures. But, in his studio and because of his presence, I really began to hear Ella Fitzgerald, Ma Rainey, Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, Paul Robeson, Lena Horne, Fats Waller.

Here Baldwin stresses that constant but passive immersion in music, including while in youth—“I had grown up with music”—is not enough to comprehend its meanings, the multiple “authoritative and double-edged” meanings that he writes of in The Fire Next Time. What makes Black Americans “authoritative” for Baldwin when performing music is their role as authors, as creators, as embodied interpreters of this music that whites have often tried to steal from them, as he notes in “Last of the Great Masters.”

Baldwin’s arguments might seem to conflict with scholars who write about Africanisms—traits and practices surviving from different African cultures in the Americas—in Black American music traditions. Baldwin was clearly an Americanist as a thinker, not an Africanist, but when he writes “this music begins on the auction block,” he is not saying that racial slavery erased all remnants of many African cultures and that Black American culture was created from only the
American experience. Rather, he believes that the experience at the root of the music begins on the auction block and can include the African musical and cultural practices that scholars like Maultsby and Floyd write about in their work.\textsuperscript{42} In addition, Baldwin's point that acceptance, rather than denial, of circumstances can lead to changing them is a crucial, potent argument for contemporary culture. Whether it's through conservative attacks against Critical Race Theory or liberal “colorblind” ignorance of the salience of race in American life today, many deny the importance of acknowledging this country's history of slavery, genocide, and imperialism. Acknowledging history is a critical step for making the United States live up to its rhetorical ideals of liberty and justice for all.

Some object that acknowledging racialized differences in experiences can be essentialist or racist. It is true, as Baldwin would be the first to point out, that genetic differences between groups constructed as white and Black do not exist; as he wrote in “On Being ‘White’ … and Other Lies,” “[T]here are no white people.”\textsuperscript{43} However, if people constructed as of different “races” are treated differently by systems of power, that creates a gulf in experience and outlook, though such people do not differ genetically. Once again, acknowledging that difference in experience—not in genetics—is crucial for the US to move forward.

What else can we learn from Baldwin's writing about music for today? Because Baldwin points to slavery as affecting whites differently than it did and does affect Blacks, Baldwin's points about Black American music hold true for much more of American music than he might have let on. Although, as seen above, he writes about whites in music like Elvis Presley and implies that white-dominated genres do not count as “American classical music,” it is worth extending his argument to genres constructed as white: does all American music begin on the auction block? The social construction of American music—not only of race—begins there.

Of course, indigenous Americans made music long before their land was stolen and later became the United States of America. However, such music-making is generally not accounted for in histories of, for example, American popular music, including ones that view race as crucial.\textsuperscript{44} Arguing this point does not mean that indigenous American music isn't music—again, how most people in this country think of American music, including its history, should include indigenous traditions, but the beginning of American music, as many conceive of it today, began—and begins—with American racial slavery.

The implications for white-dominated genres like rock, country, and American folk music are that Blackness and whiteness and their unequal relationship are critical parts of these genres as well. What Toni Morrison calls the “Africanist presence” in all is strong—both in the genres' roots in Black American music and culture and in their seeming self-definition in what they stand against.\textsuperscript{45} This duality is especially noticeable in country music: the banjo, long a prominent instrument in country, is an African instrument, but the backlash of many country fans against Black artists like Mickey Guyton and defense of Morgan Wallen's use of racist epithets makes Baldwin's point strong: this music, too, begins on the auction block, including the refiguring of the banjo as a symbol of white historical
nostalgia. In the twenty-first century, scholars like Diane Pecknold have critiqued mainstream discourses that show Black country musicians’ influence on white country giants like Hank Williams and Bill Monroe, arguing instead for a more thorough understanding of African Americans’ roles in country music as both producers and consumers of country. Baldwin’s voice resonates in such critiques because Pecknold, among others, recognizes the construction of whiteness as artificial—and how specifically country music plays a role in producing such a construction.

Rock and American folk music also have significant roots in Black American music and culture; scholars like Portia K. Maultsby and Reebee Garofalo have long argued that rock ’n’ roll came from Black people and was refigured and appropriated by whites from its earliest mainstream iterations in the 1950s. The backlash in recent decades against writings questioning the construction of rock music as white, including Sasha Frere-Jones’s admittedly problematic 2007 New Yorker article on the whiteness of alternative/indie rock, shows how deeply engrained the perception is of rock as a genre constructed as white. Garofalo and Steve Waksman additionally note the disproportionate representation of whites in the music of the 1950s and 1960s American folk revival, which clearly had important but sometimes overlooked figures in Black musicians like Lead Belly, Josh White, Odetta, and Harry Belafonte, and involved many white artists singing songs about Black civil rights. So, this music, too, begins on the auction block, not only for its potential involvement in blackface minstrelsy that grew out of slavery for white artists, as scholar Barry Shank argues, but also for its continuing marginalization of Black American artists who have played integral roles in American folk scenes over the years.

American music is significantly marked, possibly even defined, by the unequal and inequitable interaction between people constructed as white and Black. This argument does not mean that other categories like class, gender, and language do not matter. It also does not mean, of course, that Blacks cannot gain economic power within systems that racially oppress them. But today, to use Raymond Williams’s terminology, Black American genres like hip-hop have become incorporated into the dominant culture. There are Black artists, Black corporate executives, and other figures with different levels of clout, but that point does not prove that Black American music is not still rooted in racial slavery: people constructed as white still have institutional power on a racial level that people constructed as Black do not. Having a Black president in a white supremacist country did not change this fact, and Edmund Morgan’s thesis about the dual centrality of slavery and freedom to American history holds true.

Baldwin argues that Blacks understand freedom better than whites, and when I listen to Ella Fitzgerald scat-sing or watch Michael Jackson perform, I am willing to agree. Still, as Baldwin also acknowledged, the interrelation of the two groups goes far deeper than many whites are willing to acknowledge, despite whites having institutional racial power while Blacks do not. As Baldwin writes in “The Uses of the Blues,” only when Americans accept their history can they work to change it. The uses
of Black American music, then, can help different groups to acknowledge our separate but collective histories and move forward as people—if the music is used properly, to acknowledge, rather than ignore, history and to work to change the future.

Notes
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15 Baldwin, “On Being ‘White’ … and Other Lies.”


21 Ibid., pp. 121–2.


29 Ibid.


36 Miller, “Using the Blues: James Baldwin and Music,” p. 84.


42 Maultsby, “Africanisms in African American Music”; Floyd, “Ring Shout!”


50 Garofalo and Waksman, *Rockin’ Out*.


53 For examples of these singers sounding like this ideal of freedom, see Ella Fitzgerald, “How High the Moon,” from *Mack the Knife: Ella in Berlin*, Verve, 1960; and Michael Jackson, “Man in the Mirror,” from *Bad*, Epic, 1987.

**Works Cited**


**Contributor’s Biography**

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