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Race & Rock & Roll: A Visual Analysis of Rolling Stone Cover Photography

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Race & Rock & Roll:

A Visual Analysis of Rolling Stone Cover Photography
“But the thrill we’ve never known/
Is the thrill that’ll get you when you get your picture/
On the cover of *Rolling Stone*...”

-Shel Silverstein
# Table of Contents

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 4

Chapter 1: Depictions of Race During *Rolling Stone*’s Early Years, 1967-1969
......................................................................................................................................... 15

......................................................................................................................................... 35

Epilogue: Appropriation post-1980
......................................................................................................................................... 54

Conclusions ..................................................................................................................... 60

Appendix ......................................................................................................................... 65

Works Cited .................................................................................................................... 66
INTRODUCTION

Ask any American on the street to picture a rock star. You can be sure that this person will most likely conjure an image of a white man with a guitar that probably resembles Mick Jagger, or maybe Elvis. But where did this association of rock music with white men come from? Rock and roll’s most immediate origins are rooted in varieties of African American music: jazz, blues, and R&B. Moreover, the majority of artists who significantly influenced rock music’s birth and development—musicians such as Chuck Berry and Little Richard—were also African American. Despite that history, rock music videos and rock music publications are overwhelmingly populated by white faces. So, how did rock and roll, a genre of music that fashioned itself as the voice of youth rebellion against repressive behavior, a genre of music that’s supposedly infused with left-leaning politics, and a genre of music which was so originally black, become so white?

Rock and roll became categorized as a distinct musical genre during the early 1950s, with its most immediate origins rooted in jazz, blues, and Rhythm &Blues (R&B). These three genres were then known as “race music,” a term used during the first half of the 20th century to denote African American music. Rock music also developed out of the country, folk, and gospel music of the previous two decades. Although the evolution of musical genres is difficult to substantiate by hard data, most reliable sources of music history will cite Chuck Berry and Little Richard as responsible for cementing the musical foundation of rock and roll, as these two artists created and refined key technical elements and lyrical subject matter that would later become synonymous with the genre. Chuck Berry and Little Richard also wrote and recorded some of rock and roll’s earliest
and perhaps most signature anthems, including Little Richard’s “Tutti Frutti,” and Berry’s “Roll Over Beethoven” and “Johnny B. Goode.”

Considering how integral African American artists were to rock and roll’s development, black rock musicians have remained a limited presence in rock music’s visual culture. Rock and roll was derived from so-called “race music,” yet many of the styles that early rock music evolved into during the latter half of the century—psychedelic rock, glam rock, punk, heavy metal, and grunge—were almost exclusively the music of white male artists. The image of the rock musician in American visual culture is that of a white “rock god,” and this equation of white masculinity and rock is reflected through the heavy representation that white male artists enjoy in music publications, concert films, and rock music videos. Female and non-white artists exist within the rock industry, but more often than not their presence is barely visible.

That rock and roll so rapidly and so firmly turned into a white institution is also startling because rock’s genesis within the music scene occurred around the same time that the civil rights movement for desegregation was garnering attention. Notably, a new phase of racial tensions took hold in the United States after the Supreme Court’s 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision, when the formal (but inconsistently enforced) abolition of the “separate but equal” policy occurred.

Since its inception in 1967, Rolling Stone has maintained a rich visual side to its publication, emphasizing photography and illustrations nearly as much as written articles. Rolling Stone’s heavy focus on the visual makes the publication a ripe model to evaluate how race has been represented within the music industry, especially given the magazine’s symbolic value to twentieth-century rock and roll and to American culture in general.
Indeed, scholars have noted the iconic nature of *Rolling Stone* cover images. In *Gauging Outcomes of the 1960s Social Equality Movements: Nearly Four Decades of Gender and Ethnicity on the Cover of Rolling Stone Magazine*, Donnalyn Pompper, Suekyung Lee, and Shana Lerner refer to the photographs of artists depicted on *Rolling Stone* covers “as symbols of cultural identifiers” that “possess ‘mythical power’ in American popular culture” (276).

In *One Step Up and Two Steps Back: A Heuristic Model for Popular Music and Communication Research*, Stan Denski describes the historical and social background against which *Rolling Stone* was founded: “In 1967, a new publication was launched to address the cultural import of rock & roll music against a backdrop of social reform protest for women and ethnic minorities.” Citing Denski’s article, Pompper, Lee, and Lerner examine representations of ethnicity over time in *Rolling Stone* as a way of measuring visual outcomes of 1960s social equality movements. Pompper, Lee, and Lerner’s remark that *Rolling Stone* cover photographs “possess ‘mythical power’” points to the magazine’s lofty influence within American visual culture. Therefore, examining the way this particular publication portrays race is especially worthwhile. What follows is an analysis of how *Rolling Stone* has represented race on its covers, with a specific focus on the ways in which African Americans were portrayed on the magazine’s covers from issues spanning 1967-1980.

This study concentrates primarily on the covers of *Rolling Stone* for two reasons:

1) *Rolling Stone* covers possess (or possessed in the past) a symbolic importance. Notably, publications choose cover art with the knowledge that the magazine’s cover image will receive the most viewer attention.
2) The sheer volume of photography and visual art throughout *Rolling Stone*’s history is simply too great. In order to complete a worthwhile and focused visual analysis, I made the decision to limit the primary sources to work with.

My research rests on the assumption that African Americans have a conspicuously limited visual presence in rock’s mainstream media outlets, and that this invisibility demands thorough and closer scrutiny. It seems that no one has looked at *Rolling Stone*, or any rock music publication for that matter, in this way. To date, almost all of the scholarship involving *Rolling Stone* examines either the role gender plays in rock publications—the limited coverage female guitarists have received, for example—or is largely empirical in methodology, with articles devoted to displaying data and statistics about race and ethnicity, rather than close visual study (Pompper, Lee, and Lerner’s article is an example). It’s surprising that Pompper, Lee, and Lerner’s approach to scrutinizing representation in *Rolling Stone* was so focused on numbers and mathematically-based, considering that the authors write, “rap and hip-hop genres notwithstanding, very little formal research has documented rock & roll musicians across ethnicity lines and over time,” and conclude with the following harsh criticism of the sparse representation of blacks on the covers of the magazine:

Also alarming is low percentage of ethnic minorities featured on the *Rolling Stone* magazine covers in spite of the huge growth of the rap and hip-hop industries since the 1980s. Carr (C1) found that African American/Black males are confined mainly to covers of sports and music magazines—but our findings suggest that *Rolling Stone* is not one of them. It may be argued that these artists are served by
magazines like *Vibe* and *XXL*. However, we offer that *Rolling Stone* traditionally has not been averse to covering music genres beyond rock & roll proper and that Jimi Hendrix is not alone among rockers of color. We posit that such editorial decisions perpetuate deeply rooted segregation sentiments… (275, 286)

While the authors’ conclusion highlights injustice, an approach to their research geared more towards “reading” the covers—and not simply exposing statistical absences—may still be necessary, considering the loaded, extensive, and embarrassing history of how African Americans have been visually represented in American culture. In their article, Pompper, Lee, and Lerner provide useful statistics and conclusions that complement my visual study, but their numbers still only tell one part of *Rolling Stone*’s story (mainly trends of racial prevalence or absence). A more interpretational, visual approach is needed to fully tell the stories behind photographs—especially if the images of the artists depicted on *Rolling Stone* covers possess “‘mythical power’ in American pop culture.” Methodologically, the statistics-based approach that Pompper, Lee, and Lerner use to gauge social outcomes is limited because it doesn’t consider the significance of how the publication depicted race.

While statistics do expose the limited visibility of racial minorities on *Rolling Stone* covers, “a picture says a thousand words”—statistics do not. Monica Figueroa’s article, *Looking emotionally: photography, racism and intimacy in research*, further suggests the limitations of Pompper, Lee, and Lerner’s *Gauging Outcomes* article. Although Figueroa’s analysis focuses on contemporary racism in Mexico (and has nothing to do with music), she highlights how photos have a tremendous power to wield
emotion and how, therefore, it is vital to visually analyze photographs when conducting sociological research about race. Besides confirming the importance of looking at photographs when dissecting history (or constructing a narrative from it), Figueroa’s article discusses the complex relationship between the invention of photography and racism, while simultaneously acknowledging the limitations of visual analysis. She notes the importance of contextualizing images. “Photographs, discourses of race and beauty, and experiences of racism can be easily entangled with the pleasure of looking, forgetting their histories of formation and the material and symbolic meanings they have accumulated,” Figueroa writes. Yet, she also concedes, “significantly, an image can be seen as the tip of the iceberg… it can never provide a total or complete meaning…” (Figueroa 75). In the work that follows, I apply Figueroa’s approach of “‘looking emotionally,’ as a specific way of looking [at a portrait, and considering] how it feels, what it is like” in my analysis (80). This method of looking at Rolling Stone magazine covers, I believe, may fill in the narrative gaps about the magazine’s treatment of race that Pompper, Lee, and Lerner left unaddressed.

Without a doubt, race and rock music are intractably linked. In Thomas Denenberg’s photo essay for a January 2009 issue of USA TODAY, entitled “Backstage Pass,” he comments that “the relationship between rock ‘n’ roll and the camera is intimate and profound” and also that “[s]eparating race from rock ‘n’ roll is like moving salt from seawater. You can do it, but the product is something else” (Denenberg 86). Denenberg’s statements regarding the important role of photography in rock music, and that issues of race are inherently bound to rock music’s history, lead me to believe that
statistics cannot solely tell the story behind the relationship between African American rock artists and their visual record on *Rolling Stone* covers.

Many sources call attention to African Americans’ limited presence in rock music, although none specifically examine how *Rolling Stone* has reflected, or contributed to, this invisibility. In his *New York Times* piece “Every Picture Tells a Story, Don’t It?”—an art review of a recent exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum entitled *Who Shot Rock & Roll: A Photographic History, 1955 to the Present*—Ken Johnson comments, “…most of the performers depicted [in the exhibit are white] too. There are some pictures of black performers, but all have achieved crossover recognition, from Chuck Berry and Aretha Franklin to Tina Turner, Grace Jones and L L Cool J” (C19). Quite similarly to Johnson, David Carr observes the homogeneous racial makeup of subjects featured in mainstream journalism in his *New York Times* article, *On Covers of Many Magazines, A Full Racial Palette Is Still Rare*. “In many broad-circulation magazines,” Carr says, “the unspoken but routinely observed practice of not using nonwhite cover subjects—for fear they will depress newsstand sales—remains largely in effect (Carr C1).” Carr’s opinion that white faces possess selling power that black faces lack highlights the financial incentives that music publications have to feature white artists on their covers.

Although Pompper, Lee, and Lerner’s article cites “deeply rooted segregation sentiments” to be at the heart of African American performers’ absence on *Rolling Stone* covers, other texts, such as Carr’s article, point out that profit motives are very much behind editorial decisions. However, perhaps segregationist sentiments and profit motives
are not so separate. Maureen Mahon, an author who has written prolifically on the relationship between race and the music industry, maintains that racism and financial incentives are inextricably linked. Her article, *Black Like This: Race, Generation, and Rock in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, notes the symbolically white nature of rock, and also expresses how popular culture affected rock and roll’s target audience over time:

As rock ‘n’ roll expanded beyond its core black constituency and began to appeal to white teenagers, the form itself became associated with whites in the American popular imagination. Indeed, by the mid-1980s, black Americans who engaged in rock as musicians or listeners stood out from the black mainstream for their allegiance to a music that no longer seemed to be “really black.” (Mahon 283)

Mahon seems to suggest that for black musicians, a kind of stigma developed for those who chose to create or play rock music. Thus this stigma, and its subsequent affect on the rock industry’s racial demographics, readily influenced the way publications such as *Rolling Stone* marketed their appeal to specific population brackets. Mahon explains in her article—and in a more in-depth manner in her book, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race*—how the “impulse to contest” this stigma led Living Colour guitarist Vernon Reid, artist manager Konda Mason, and writer Greg Tate to found the Black Rock Coalition (abbreviated BRC) in New York during 1985.

The BRC was a collective of artists and activists, mostly middle-class and college educated, who were united by “the peculiar difficulties they faced as African American rock musicians: the idea that black people wanted to play rock ‘n’ roll was implausible to
many record executives—and indeed many music consumers—who held rigid opinions as to what constituted authentic black music” (Mahon 283). As Mahon details in *Right to Rock*, the formation of the BRC was largely a response to white rock artists’ appropriation of black performance styles. Since the late 1960s in particular, white rockers began to perform their music under a loose amalgamation of visual and aesthetic identities that characterized them as “White Negroes.” White Negroes—such as Elvis, who epitomizes the term—appropriated African American dance and performance styles, much to their own musical and commercial success. By the latter half of the twentieth century, White Negro rock artists in America had appropriated a musical and cultural space once dominated by African Americans to the extent that the founders of the BRC felt it was necessary to form a coalition and support system for black musicians, whose careers were adversely affected by the white appropriation of rock and roll.

Incorporating Mahon’s research into this study, I use her conclusions about White Negroes and appropriation to inform my visual analyses. The term “White Negro” gained widespread usage in America when, in 1957, writer Norman Mailer published an essay entitled “The White Negro” for *Dissent*, a New York-based political publication.1 Citing, in particular, the alluring “spontaneity” of jazz, Mailer in his essay theorizes that in various American cities, “an avant-garde generation—that post-war generation of adventurers who…had absorbed the lessons of disillusionment” were “attracted to what

1 Interestingly, *Dissent*—as a New York-based publication comprised of cultural and political commentary—provided, at least in part, a ripe paradigm for Rolling Stone’s conception. While this piece of history may be coincidental, I find it significant that the cultural debut of the term “white negro” occurred in a left-leaning political publication, as this association inextricably links the model of race appropriation with a particular mode of cultural production.
the Negro had to offer” (Mailer 3). Using very sexualized language, a tone that pervades the entire piece, Mailer equates the white appropriation of African American culture with being a hipster in his literal narrative detailing the cultural genealogy of the “White Negro.” The imagery he uses to describe White Negroes is fused with eroticism as well. “In such places as Greenwich Village,” he writes, “a ménage-a-trois was completed—the bohemian and the juvenile delinquent came face-to-face with the Negro, and the hipster was a fact in American life” (Mailer 3-4). Importantly, Mailer fails to discuss the ethical issues and social consequences surrounding the appropriation.

White Negroes acted, I argue, as a kind of proxy for African Americans on *Rolling Stone* covers, and *Rolling Stone*’s decision to feature these white “replacements” for black artists helped naturalize a trend of whites occupying cultural spaces once dominated by African Americans. That White Negroes could act as “decent”—i.e., acceptable to the dominant white culture—replacements for actual black artists in *Rolling Stone* seems plausible when Mahon later contends in *Right to Rock* that “Historically, aesthetic shifts and economic success in the music industry have resulted from the exploitation of black American creativity and the marginalization of black American people” (Mahon 147).

Mahon notes that after the death of Jimi Hendrix in 1970, blacks were totally absent from the mainstream rock scene. The media coverage of the BRC, she says, then “seized on the novelty of black rockers and then picked up the rhetoric of the BRC to explain that black rock really wasn’t new at all” (6-7). Mahon’s work involving appropriation and rock music, and especially her analyses of White Negroes, are integral to this study. Her insights about the rock industry’s treatment of race socially and
historically contextualized the *Rolling Stone* covers that are examined in this paper. This analysis of *Rolling Stone* builds upon her research regarding White Negroes, but importantly adds a visual analysis of photographs that supplements her discourse. That is, Mahon explains conceptually how the music industry erased rock and roll’s African American presence; the work that ensues here complements hers in exploring how *Rolling Stone* covers have depicted race since the publication’s founding in 1967.

This study is divided into three parts. Chapter 1 examines the discrepancies between the ways white and black artists were depicted on early *Rolling Stone* covers, from issues spanning 1967-1969. Chapter II explores an array of cover images that reflect *Rolling Stone*’s depiction of White Negroes, and also the ways in which the cover images of African American artists began to lose their once-kinetic qualities and physicality after *Rolling Stone*’s pattern of featuring White Negroes became fully entrenched in the mid-1970s. Following Chapter II, a brief epilogue presents two covers that demonstrate how, after 1980, *Rolling Stone*’s pattern of racial appropriation on its covers had developed into more than a loosely-established trend: appropriation was a firm practice of the magazine and inherent to the way *Rolling Stone* visually treated race for the remainder of the twentieth century.
I.

Black Physicality vs. White Interiority on Covers from 1967-1969

“The sexual lionizing of the black musician merely appropriates him for white consumption…” (Shin and Judson 257)

Young writers legitimized rock journalism as a serious branch of entertainment writing during the mid- to late-1960s, largely because after the Beatles’ breakthrough success in 1964, media outlets began to treat pop and rock music more seriously. First published in 1967, *Rolling Stone* magazine, along with publications such as *Crawdaddy!* and *Creem*, was among the first generation of American magazines that set the standard for music criticism and writing about rock music. According to *Rolling Stone* founder and editor-in-chief Jan Wenner, the magazine’s original premise was to offer a savvy readership with what editors saw as material covering “changes in rock & roll and the changes related to rock & roll,” along with areas of culture—politics, movies, sports, and “other forms of American social behavior”—that rock music “touched, embraced or informed” (Wenner 1, 5). Generally, perhaps, due to its association with 1960s counterculture, *Rolling Stone* has been considered to have a left-leaning political bias, though “[c]ritics offer mixed assessments of the magazine’s ideological leanings.” Pompper, Lee and Lerner point out that some critics view the writing in *Rolling Stone* as “‘conservative’” because it “seeks to create the past in its nostalgic views” of the baby boomer generation’s youth music (Pompper and Lee 276). Other critics have deemed the publication “‘liberal,’ perhaps for its shocking cover displays of sexualized subjects (e.g. nude John Lennon and Yoko Ono) and for defying traditional magazine conventions”
Yet, by and large, criticism of *Rolling Stone* has lacked explicit inquiries into the magazine’s treatment of race; far more common are analyses of its political slants and representations of gender.\(^2\)

That this body of *Rolling Stone* criticism lacks such visual analyses of race is surprising, since, as Ulrich Adelt notes, “The complex identification of white people with black sounds has a longstanding tradition, as many scholars have traced in recent years” (Adelt 434). Americans could benefit from an increased number of critical analyses regarding representations of race in American popular culture, Ulrich Adelt asserts, especially because supposedly progressive artistic movements of the 1960s might not have been as progressive as many Americans believe them to have been. For instance, in his article, “Trying to Find an Identity: Eric Clapton’s Changing Conception of ‘Blackness,’” Adelt considers how Eric Clapton’s views of race and musical authenticity affected his various performance styles over the course of his musical career. To contextualize this analysis, Adelt writes, “Recently, Manuel Luis Martinez has uncovered reactionary, imperialistic, misogynistic, and racist tendencies in the writings of Beat Generation authors” (Adelt 434).\(^3\) After illustrating examples of these tendencies in excerpts from Ginsberg and Kerouac’s writing, Martinez then “finds a continuation of the Beats’ neo-romantic and reactionary tendencies in the 1960s countercultural writings of

\(^2\) Though issues dealing with gender and politics in American culture can never be fully isolated from issues of race and racial representation, there exists a notable absence of scholarship that seeks to examine how *Rolling Stone* has specifically presented race within its pages over the course of the magazine’s history.

\(^3\) See Manuel Luis Martinez, *Countering the Counterculture: Rereading Postwar American Dissent from Jack Kerouac to Tomás Rivera* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2003) 84.
Hunter S. Thompson and Ken Kesey,” two writers who—rather significantly, I think—also contributed material to *Rolling Stone* for a number of years. “Martinez’s approach of countering the counterculture,” Adelt explains, “paves the way for a more complex discussion of the racial politics of seemingly progressive artistic movements of the 1960s” (Adelt 435). Adelt’s insights into Eric Clapton’s self consciousness about his own musical authenticity are notable, as the format of Clapton’s first cover photograph on *Rolling Stone* (which will be discussed later in this chapter) was a part of a larger trend in the magazine’s representation of race during its earliest issues. During this time Clapton, Adelt reveals, had a very narrow definition of what constituted “authentic” blues compositions. According to Clapton, “pure” blues music is introspective, and his contemplative, romantic portrait on his 1968 *Rolling Stone* cover reflects that self-conscious introspection.

On the covers of very early issues of *Rolling Stone* (the magazine’s first two years of circulation), African Americans were depicted very differently from white artists; black artists were visually defined by their physicality, while white artists were often rendered through headshots that highlighted their interiority and contemplation. Photographers often captured black musicians mid-performance, which resulted in images that are implicative of the performer’s physical movement; for instance, blurring is common in these cover photos. The composition on covers featuring African Americans is often such that the movement of the person within the frame appears to extend beyond the image itself. Early covers that featured white artists, on the other hand, were much more still in quality. They were likely to resemble tightly framed classical portraits, suggestive of introspection and thinking. It wasn’t until the turn of the decade,
during 1970, roughly, that this photographic distinction reversed. Around that time, cover photographs of white musicians began to assume a “white negro” likeness; covers featuring black artists, conversely, became more infrequent, and the rare issues that did feature black artists usually depicted their subjects quite statically and in a disengaged manner.

Although White Negroes have become synonymous with rock and roll, Norman Mailer’s initial use of the term was not so music-specific. Controversial, Mailer’s “The White Negro” essay drew criticism from whites and blacks alike upon its circulation in 1957. But even though some of his statements sound dubious when read in 2010, Mailer’s vision of the ways in which African American aesthetic styles could be borrowed by whites of certain subcultures marked an astonishing departure—a role reversal, really—from an established historical pattern of whites representing and performing blackness solely through mockery. Whites had, in the literal sense, “worn” blackface in minstrel show performances over a century before Mailer published his essay. Nonetheless, “The White Negro,” for all its questionably typified descriptions of black culture and sexuality, lauded the black experience as something “‘real’ to aspire to in the face of white alienation” (Adelt 434).

Arguably, Mailer’s essay—in presenting blackness as an enviable social and aesthetic identity—was the first literary description of its kind. And yet, at the same time that “The White Negro” offered that it was acceptable and even trendy, perhaps, for whites to appropriate black aesthetics, the essay also contains descriptions of African American culture that conform to stereotypes. At various times in the piece, Mailer freely employs reductive and static representations of blackness that took hold in American
visual culture over a century before he wrote his piece. In a disturbingly casual tone, Mailer characterizes all African Americans as hyper-sexualized, exoticizes “the profound sensitivity of the Negro jazzman who was the cultural mentor of his people,” and claims “the Negro discovered and elaborated a morality of the bottom,” as if that were some sort of compliment (Mailer 10).

For all that it renders blackness as a legitimately attractive social and visual identity, Mailer’s essay, to be sure, also raises significant questions about race, authenticity, and the appropriation of culture and art. Though he does not indict white hipsters for reproducing African American aesthetics and styles as their own, Mailer does seem to suggest the one-sidedness of this exchange, if it can be called such, at various times in his writing. “And in this wedding of the white and the black it was the Negro who brought the cultural dowry,” he remarks, exposing the disproportionate—but not so much indebted—nature of white appropriation (Mailer 4). For Mailer, whites could appropriate black styles, receive credit for the appeal of their adopted visual identity, and still owe nothing to the African Americans whom they imitated. Mailer’s writing illustrates that he was aware of the unevenness in this cultural transaction, and yet the matter-of-fact tone that he uses to describe that uneven element of appropriation strongly suggests his implicit acceptance of the matter. He does not question the expectation that whites were entitled to utilize black identities for their own benefit.

Perhaps because of this acceptance and failure to question, what Mailer still fails to address in his discussion of the hipster appropriating black culture are the following questions: when is artistic appropriation allowed, and when does it become a form of thievery or plagiarism? What ethical issues are at stake in whites’ appropriation of
blackness? Is appropriation simply imitation? Or, can appropriation be considered a form of cultural and historical robbery—and, if so, who has ownership over a specific kind of artistic expression and how is that ownership determined, not to mention enforced? I argue that, in the case of *Rolling Stone* covers, the appropriation of black styles by white musicians pushed black musicians out of a cultural and representational space.

Though referring to appropriation in literary tradition, Henry Louis Gates evokes Zora Neale Hurston’s notion that “originality is in fact masterful revision” in his exploration of questions similar to these in his book, *The Signifying Monkey*. “Every great artist… ‘re-interprets.’ We ‘cannot claim first source even for Shakespeare,’” Gates writes, reiterating the rich historical association of imitation and art. “Instead, borrowings, echoes, and revisions characterize modern art of all forms…” (Gates 118). Likewise, although “quoting” (referencing an excerpt from another artist’s piece of music as a nod in homage) has almost always been prevalent in music (and jazz especially), it seems that when appropriation of art is conflated with matters of race, separate issues of cultural visibility are at stake. Issues of visibility are of greater consequence when the group whose art is appropriated has a history of being marginalized by American institutions. Thus, appropriation is a kind of theft of cultural space, an act of artistic colonialism. To see how this appropriation occurs, we need to first look at early *Rolling Stone* covers, in which race was represented fairly stereotypically; black artists were often photographed in motion during this period.

During the first two years of *Rolling Stone*’s publication (1967 through early 1969), the photographs of African American musicians featured on its covers reflect the “spontaneity” that Mailer equated with black culture in “The White Negro,” and his
additional observation that “[m]ovement is always to be preferred to inaction” (Mailer 11). Tina Turner and Jimi Hendrix for instance, on Issues 2 (Nov. 23, 1967) and 7 (March 9, 1968) respectively [Fig 1.1 and 1.2], are captured mid-performance on their cover images. Their portrayals are offered through actions shots and are very much defined by their physicalities; their bodies are shown in motion and extend beyond the photograph’s edges.

The visual focus of both images is anchored around the movement of Turner and Hendrix’s bodies and the camera’s momentary trapping of their energy in transient freeze-frame. Visible beads of sweat covering Turner’s face, neck, and chest—as well as her gaping open mouth—lend an especially frenetic quality to the photograph, resonating with Mailer’s remarks that “[i]n motion” a Negro’s “body is warm, his instincts are quick” (Mailer 11). The way physical planes and space are rendered in Hendrix’s photo is also notable; his guitar appears to jut out of the cover, disrupting the expected 2-D qualities of a normal image. The language of the headlines surrounding Turner and Hendrix’s cover images also evokes the candid, kinetic aspects of these two photos. The caption under Turner reads: “TINA TURNER—SOCKIN’ TO YOU” and the caption “JUMPIN’ JIMI” accompanies Hendrix’s photo.

Comparatively, cover photographs from roughly the same time period that feature Eric Clapton on Issue 10 (May 11, 1968) [Fig 1.3], Frank Zappa on Issue 14 (July 20, 1968) [Fig. 1.4], and Mick Jagger on Issue 19 (Oct. 12, 1968) [Fig, 1.5], depict the white musicians in headshots, or offstage in a separate environment. Clapton’s photo is a close-up, taken from his shoulders on up, and is stylized in a blue tint. He wears an extremely pensive and serious expression that borders on somber. Any evidence of performance, or
the animated act of playing rock and roll, has been extracted from his cover image in favor of rendering his artistic identity through a portrait. In Clapton and Zappa’s portraits especially, thinking, contemplation, and a certain sense of interiority are conveyed—the tone of these covers is very distinct from the physicality of Turner and Hendrix’s.

The still, calm nature of Clapton’s cover photo can be readily appreciated when compared to photographer Baron Wolman’s visceral description of shooting Turner’s cover. Remembering that he freely hopped onstage, he recalls in an interview, “For Tina Turner, I was twelve feet away—I could smell her.”

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4 www.fotobaron.com
Images removed for copyright reasons.

Figure 1.1
Images removed due to copyright reasons.
What do Turner and Hendrix’s physicalities say about their social position in culture? Interestingly, Mailer attributes the kinetic elements he sees as inherent to black identity to matters of social power and space. “The emphasis is on energy,” he says, “because [the Negro and the hipster] are nothing without it since they do not have the protection of a position or a class to rely on” (Mailer 11). There’s no denying that there’s truth to Mailer’s remark about social hierarchies and race. By contrast, Greil Marcus contends that unlike white musicians who appropriated black aesthetic styles in order to capitalize on the potential popularity of increasingly sexualized and exotic performances, “the backdoor freedoms of black music” presented an opportunity for social mobility for Elvis, “giving him the chance to exchange his hillbilly strangeness for acceptability.” That is, “as a Southerner and white trash to boot, Elvis was already outside” (Marcus 173-4).

The success of white musicians who adopted African American musical and performance styles cannot entirely be dismissed as illegitimate. Marcus asserts that white blues singers such as Jimmie Rodgers, Dock Boggs, Elvis, and Bob Dylan, added their own flair and personal stamp to their music. “True as it is in an historical or commercial sense,” Marcus continues, “too much has been made of Elvis as ‘a white man who sang black music credibly,’ as a singer who made black music acceptable to whites” (Marcus 169). But what were those commercial outcomes, as Marcus mentions, of white artists making “something new out of the blues”? Dismissing the very real talents of such white musicians is shortsighted, but the social consequences of this trajectory in rock history demands scrutiny. Although this work seeks to inspect how race has been depicted on covers of Rolling Stone since its inception, it is also important to consider the social
consequences of such representations. Pompper, Lee, and Lerner’s empirical study of the racial makeup of the covers reveals “that *Rolling Stone* readers have consistently encountered images of predominantly Caucasian/White males for thirty-seven years⁵…and are more likely to discount contributions of…people of color who are singers, musicians, and leaders in American popular culture” (Pompper and Lee 286). Such an absence of African American artists on “one of the rock institution’s most prominent mouthpieces” suggests that a larger story, and one which reveals the intricacies of the relationship among *Rolling Stone*, the music industry, and race, needs to be told (Mazullo 147). White rock artists were gaining commercial popularity, but at whose expense?

Andrew Shin and Barbara Judson explain in *Beneath the Black Aesthetic: James Baldwin’s Primer of Black American Masculinity* that in “The White Negro,” “Positions like Mailer’s construct the black musician as stud, making his artistic authority a function of his sexual potency” (Shin and Judson 257). Indeed, the discrepancy between the way *Rolling Stone* portrayed Turner and Hendrix, versus the way the publication visually treated white men such as Clapton and Zappa reveals the truth of this statement. *Rolling Stone* depicted Black performers through their sexualities and physical body movements and not as intellectuals, as whites were portrayed.

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⁵ Pompper, Lee and Lerner’s study was conducted in 2004.
Images removed due to copyright reasons.
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The latter half of 1969 was a transitional period for *Rolling Stone* covers. The magazine covers hadn’t fully begun their pattern of portraying white artists and cultural icons as White Negroes at this time, and yet, it is evident that the visual language of the covers was evolving very quickly during this period. Depictions of race aside, cover photographs of all artists began to assume a more constructed look; increasingly, *Rolling Stone* cover photos were being shot in studios, and weren’t captured during live concerts. This may be, in part, due to access issues that began to crop up during the turn of the decade:

According to Baron Wolman, the first chief photographer of the magazine, and former *Rolling Stone* managing editor John Burks, now a professor of journalism at San Francisco State University, “The only way for Baron to do the work he did, so close to the performers, so lyrical and intimate, was through access,” confirms Burks… the kind of off-hand directness featured in those early issues of *Rolling Stone* shots no longer exists.  

The photograph of Chuck Berry on the cover of Issue 35 (June 14, 1969) [Fig 1.6] marks *Rolling Stone*’s departure away from using candid shots of African American artists—like the first ones of Jimi Hendrix and Tina Turner—taken during performances. As with the covers of Hendrix and Turner, Baron Wolman shot Berry’s photo. In the image, Berry is captured from his shoulders on up from a slightly low angle. His mouth is slightly agape and his eyes do not make direct contact with the camera, but instead look

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6 Commentary from the Nov. 20-26, 1997 issue of the Sonoma County Independent. Copyright © Metro Publishing Inc. Maintained by Boulevards New Media.
up toward the upper-right corner of the cover. The picture by itself is fairly plain and conforms more to the portrait style of the covers featuring Eric Clapton, Frank Zappa, and Mick Jagger than it does to the format of Tina Turner and Jimi Hendrix’s covers that were examined earlier. Importantly, though, the headline to the left of Berry’s face, which reads, “Roll Over, Chuck Berry,” directly references white appropriation of rock music.
Images removed due to copyright reasons.

Figure 1.6
On the surface, “Roll Over, Chuck Berry” is an obvious play on the title of one of Berry’s most signature anthems, “Roll Over Beethoven.” When placed within the context of white rockers appropriating his music, though, *Rolling Stone*’s play on words signifies more than a clever headline. The original song title reflects its lyrical content—the desire for rock and roll to replace and acquire the past popularity of classical music. Berry doesn’t explicitly mention race in the song, but it’s by no means a stretch to say that a logical extension of his desire would include having his own music occupy the cultural space once held by white, classical composers. By using the phrase, “Roll Over Beethoven” in 1956, Berry announced Beethoven’s figurative demise, and, by extension, the end too, of white domination over music. By accompanying Berry’s cover photograph with the headline, “Roll Over, Chuck Berry,” *Rolling Stone* reversed Berry’s original statement and, in essence, used his own song title against him.

The issue of the magazine with Berry’s image on the cover materialized during a time when white males were, more and more, becoming the face of rock music. It’s impossible to know if the *Rolling Stone* writer who fashioned the headline had racial or cultural appropriation on his or her mind (my guess is that he or she did not). Still, I believe that the substitution of Chuck Berry’s name for Beethoven’s provides a subtle commentary about race and rock music, even if the connotations that emerged from the author’s language play were unintentional. Chuck Berry—and his image—are symbolic of a certain kind of reign over rock and roll. Chuck Berry presided over rock music’s birth. Most reliable sources of music history will cite him among those responsible for cementing the musical foundation of rock music, and for creating and refining the key technical elements and lyrical subject matter that would later become synonymous with
the genre. Yet, the headline adjacent to Berry’s cover photograph, however minute a detail, is symbolic of white appropriation of black sounds and cultural space. Furthermore, the cover set the stage for *Rolling Stone*’s future use of White Negroes in place of African Americans.
II. 

**ROLLING STONE and the “WHITE NEGRO”**

[Eric] Clapton felt it legitimate to identify as a “white negro” and take everything but the burden from black culture. (Adelt 435)

You know, I’m not black, but there’s a whole lot of times I wish I could say I’m not white. – Frank Zappa

In *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and The Cultural Politics of Race*, Maureen Mahon prefaces her attempt to tackle questions of how racial identities relate to rock music with the observation that “popular music is an arena where questions of identity, authenticity, and taste intersect with race in especially vivid ways” (Mahon 9). In particular, in her examination of the history of rock ‘n roll, Mahon highlights the discrepancy between the freedom the “White Negro” performer can assume with regard to identity, but which the African American performer readily cannot:

[It is] populated with white performers whose success was a result of their ability to mine African American traditions in a way that appealed to white audiences. Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, the Rolling Stones, the Animals, and Janis Joplin are all types of White Negroes, borrowing the black mystique, language, music, and attitude…[t]heir more easily acceptable versions of black music and their ability to solve the problem of black people in black music do not undercut their talent, but are a very real part of their success. White Negroes wear a mask that allows them to experience the excitement of being the dark other, but it is a mask
that they can remove if need be. This flexibility is, of course, a luxury no African American can enjoy. (Mahon 248)

The luxury of racial flexibility that White Negroes can enjoy, as Mahon puts it, is not unique to music. Andrew Ross, in a review of an exhibit entitled *Black Romantic*, which was on display at the Whitney Museum in New York in 2002, quotes Dean Mitchell, a painter from Kansas who, over the course of his career as an artist, has learned that the range of images that black artists can sell is very narrow. “‘Caucasians,’ he [Mitchell] speculates, ‘have an easier time accepting conceptual treatments of race in America than they do with black images…that are dignified, regal, or powerful’” (Ross 27). Ross’ review, by evoking Mitchell’s observation that the range of black images that whites will buy remains extremely limited, may shed light on the way *Rolling Stone* has rendered images of black artists on its covers. Ross points out that the theoretical prospect of blacks possessing social power seems fine to many white Americans, until that social power presents itself in front on them and they must confront it with their own eyes. Because, as Lawrence Grossberg says, “[p]opular culture is a place where individuals make emotional investments,” questions such as “who is *Rolling Stone*’s target audience?” and “whose photos and what type of images would that target audience be likely to buy?” are worth asking (Grossberg 24). I will explore these questions in greater depth later in this chapter.

As we will see, White Negroes increasingly populate *Rolling Stone* covers throughout the 1970s. But how did these racial depictions take form in a magazine that, by most accounts, espouses a very liberal political philosophy? What did the publication
seek to gain by including portrayals of “white negroes” on their covers? Perhaps *Rolling Stone* treats racial difference less progressively than it does other political and cultural issues. If Mitchell’s point is true, *Rolling Stone* also had a substantial financial incentive to feature white artists in the stead of blacks—and featuring white artists as white negroes provided the magazine a way to eliminate many images of blacks without eliminating the stylistic attributes that many readers might have found exotic and attractive. “Large commercial markets sustained by popular music today depend on the existence of white negroes,” Andrew Ross says in “Wiggaz with attitude (WWA),” another article he contributed to Artforum International magazine. “Ever since the minstrel shows, black music has been central to establishing a sense of white unity…[o]ver time, whiteness became a valuable investment, and, consequently, more difficult to give up” (Ross 26-7).

That is, perhaps White Negroes provided *Rolling Stone* covers a way to feature the selling power of a white face with the selling power of black style.

Fewer than ten African Americans appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone* between 1971 through 1974, and the ones who did were either musicians who had experienced crossover success, or celebrities who weren’t music artists: Michael Jackson, Muhammad Ali, Ike and Tine Turner, Marvin Gaye, Huey Newton, and Diana Ross. After the death of Jimi Hendrix in 1970, *Rolling Stone* (with very few exceptions) operated as if black rockers were an extinct phenomenon; White Negroes had taken their place. Debating whether the white faces featured inside *Rolling Stone* were simply a reflection of an all-white rock industry, or, on the contrary, if *Rolling Stone*’s lack of racial diversity contributed to rock and roll being equated with whiteness, is bound to be a circular chicken-or-the-egg argument. Despite that paradox, *Rolling Stone* undoubtedly,
in part because of its symbolic importance and stature, was complicit in reifying “racist perceptions that informed music industry executives’ concepts of ‘appropriate’ black music” (Mahon 6).

Beginning around 1970, *Rolling Stone* tended to represent White Negroes on their covers in two ways: through eroticizing and sexualizing, or by way of outlandish and wild costuming. Mick Jagger’s photo on the cover of Issue 112 (July 6, 1972) [Fig. 2.1] provides a good example of the former; Alice Cooper’s cover image on Issue 105 (March 30, 1972) [Fig. 2.3] provides a good example of the latter. On Issue 112, Mick Jagger’s body, from the crotch area on up, runs the length of the cover and is the focus of the picture. His skin-tight jumpsuit is unlaced to below his chest, and his arms are raised behind his head—a pose that can be interpreted as submission, perhaps, or Mick Jagger’s anticipation of taking his clothes off. His physicality, stereotypically associated with being black, is now part of his whiteness, and is integral to his image as a white rock & roll artist. When compared to the first cover image of Jagger that we looked at, the evolution is shocking, and overtly erotic in nature. Furthermore, Jagger’s pose, in placing his hands behind his head, engenders his photograph in an unexpected way; Jagger was notorious for his womanizing, and yet, the way he is posed does not evoke aggression and is not traditionally masculine. Jagger’s submissive pose may illustrate that along with their racial flexibility, White Negroes—because they possess the privilege of being socially unmarked by virtue of their color—also possess a certain degree of flexibility in the way they perform gender onstage.

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7 In a more contemporary image of Janet Jackson on Issue 665 (Sept. 16, 1993) [Fig. 2.2]—which was probably *Rolling Stone*’s most controversial cover of all time—Jackson’s pose closely mirrors that of Jagger’s from 1972.
There are no cover images of black artists that are engendered in a similar manner to Jagger’s, but why is this? It is important to remember that while Mailer casts “the Negro” as a source of authenticity, this authenticity is simultaneously defined through Mailer’s view of the Negro as the embodiment of masculine virility. Andrew Shin and Barbara Judson write that blacks who embraced the “hierarchy of traditional heterosexuality” thought James Baldwin (who was homosexual) “presented a public image of the black man as castrated, the black man as a woman” (Shin and Judson 250). Shin and Judson later contend that being black does not wield the same social power that being white does, and so being “black enough” becomes synonymous with being “masculine enough.” Unlike Baldwin, Mick Jagger has more leeway with the way he models his sexuality; as a white man, of course, Jagger doesn’t have to worry that his public image is “white enough.” Because he is white and male, his white skin makes him white enough.

While Alice Cooper’s image doesn’t bend gender norms in the way that Jagger’s photograph does, Cooper’s image displays an outrageousness that also demonstrates the White Negro’s performative flexibility. On his cover image, Cooper is shirtless, with a large snake wrapped around his neck, slithering its way into Cooper’s unkempt hair. Cooper seems to be half-smiling and half-grimacing, and has dark eye makeup painted around his eyes; he looks like Medusa. A caption to the right of his bare shoulder, which looks as if it was a handwritten autograph styled by Cooper himself, reads: “Love it to Death, Alice Cooper.” The cover’s romanticizing death and living a debauched rock and roll lifestyle evokes Mailer’s rationalization of why hipsters and White Negroes follow a philosophy of ambivalence in terms of their own mortality:
If the fate of the twentieth century man is to live with death from adolescence to premature senescence, why then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self. (Mailer 2)

Cooper’s cover and its relation to the above excerpt from “The White Negro” also resonate with George Clinton’s observation that black artists do not possess the same freedom of performativity that white artists enjoy, with regard to how far they can take their act on stage. In an interview he participated in for a Rolling Stone archive book, *Rolling Stone: The Decades of Rock & Roll*, interviewer Michael Ochs prods the Parliament/Funkadelic frontman to explain the double-standard black artists must endure:

OCHS: But in the early seventies, it was one thing to be white and crazy onstage, like Iggy Pop or Alice Cooper. It was quite another to be black and crazy. You must have seemed pretty scary to some audiences…

CLINTON: We were ten crazy niggers. With Jimi Hendrix, it was cool because it was him and two white boys. (Ochs 162)
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Images removed due to copyright reasons.

Figure 2.2
Images removed due to copyright reasons.
This performative flexibility that White Negroes can assume, but which blacks cannot, comes from the social power that is a virtue of being white and male. The covers of Issue 48 (Dec. 13, 1969) [Fig. 2.3] and Issue 55 (Apr. 2, 1970) [Fig. 2.4], which feature Miles Davis\(^8\) and Abbie Hoffman’s photographs respectively, together illustrate this performative flexibility for whites, perhaps more clearly than Jagger and Cooper’s images, even. Davis and Hoffman’s cover photographs are very much in dialogue with each other and therefore, they warrant a comparative analysis that juxtaposes the images within the context of *Rolling Stone*’s depiction of racial appropriation and White Negroes. The high angle from which Davis’ portrait is taken makes his head look oddly large in proportion to his torso, lending an overall space-age likeness to the photo: Davis wears big, square glasses that look bug-like and obscure his eyes from view, and he leans forward over a graphically-rendered table, towards the reader, as if undergoing an interrogation; Davis also wears a bracelet that closely resembles a shackle, or a handcuff. The stern appearance of Davis’ image contrasts with the humor and satire of Hoffman’s.

Although the cover featuring activist Abbie Hoffman came out almost four months after Davis’, the composition of Hoffman’s photograph complements Davis’ to the extent that the two covers appear to be in direct conversation with each other. Hoffman wears a police cap and collared shirt in his picture and, like Davis, is also seated at a table, albeit this one has an ashtray and paper cup positioned upon it. Hoffman could, for all we know, have been on the other side of the table that Miles Davis sat at, performing the part of the cop who was asking Davis questions—if, that is, the emotional tones of both covers weren’t so conflicting. Though Davis’ photo contains an

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\(^8\) Like the previous three cover images of African American artists we’ve looked at, Baron Wolman also photographed Davis’ cover feature.
otherworldly feel to it, his serious facial expression and the bleak coloring of the graphics make him appear stoic, and possibly angry. Hoffman, on the other hand, appears sillier. He looks clownish, as if he wasn’t expecting to have his photo taken, and the caption to the left of his photo reads: “Abbie Hoffman in drag.” The photo caption is a comment, most likely, on the bubblegum-pink shirt Hoffman has on (which matches the color of the border around him), and is also a tongue-in-cheek remark intended to draw attention to the irony and humor of Hoffman dressing up as a police officer.

By situating Davis across the table from Hoffman, as a would-be suspect in a police station, *Rolling Stone* conforms to Mailer’s illustration of the “Negro” as inhabiting “a morality of the bottom,” whether it is “perversion, promiscuity, pimpery, drug addiction…what-have-you” (Mailer 10). Hoffman, wearing the role of an authority figure, is not so much positioned in moral opposition to Davis as he is positioned in a place where he can experience the danger of the other from a safe vantage point, free from actual peril. The caption reminds us that Hoffman is “in drag.” As cultural critic Maureen Mahon says, he is only “wear[ing] a mask that allows [him] to experience the excitement of being the dark other, but it is a mask that [he] can remove if need be.” Unlike Miles Davis, Hoffman has a freedom to mock the U.S. legal system openly and derisively, and so Hoffman, when compared to Davis, is a White Negro. He has the flexibility to switch performance personas, and gets to experience the contents of performing a minstrel-like role without bearing any of the burdens of wearing blackface.
Images removed due to copyright reasons.
Images removed due to copyright reasons.
Conversely, Hoffman’s pose as a police officer is funny; his costume alludes to his arrest in Chicago, and subsequent trial that year for conspiracy, due to his prominent role in the anti-Vietnam protests that took place during the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Hoffman is notorious for his outrageous antics in the courtroom during the trial after his arrest. Among other acts, he dressed up as a clown and continually made honking noises with his nose when the judge presiding over the trial tried to speak. Significantly, the humor of Hoffman’s cover is dependent upon the flexibility that Hoffman has due to his being white. If an African American were posed on the cover, dressed in the same costume—as a cop—the image would carry a totally different set of violent connotations and thus elicit a much darker tone.

During his interview inside the issue, Davis describes the tendency of whites in rock to appropriate black idioms, although he doesn’t name the pattern in those words. When asked [as a jazz trumpeter] of his opinion concerning rock music, Davis responds by maligning the legitimacy of white groups who appropriate black performance styles:

“It’s social music. There’s two kinds—white and black, and those bourgeois spades are trying to sing white and the whites are trying to sound colored. It’s embarrassing. It’s like me wearing a dress. Blood, Sweat and Tears is embarrassing to me. They try to be so hip, they’re not. They try to sing black and talk white.” (Gleason 23)

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9 The "Chicago Eight" were eight protestors who were charged with conspiracy, inciting to riot, and other charges related to violent protests that took place in Chicago at the time of the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Hoffman, especially, was said to have flouted courtroom decorum during the trial by, among other acts, dressing in judicial robes and blowing kisses at the jury.
Davis’ remark that rock is “social music” and his indictment of “bourgeois spades…trying to sing white” in his interview rather importantly highlight the issues of social space occupation, authenticity, and race/class identity that appropriation is fraught with. For Davis to wear a dress is unthinkable; for Hoffman to appear in drag is totally within the logic of his enactments in the courtroom and the culture.

Music in America had been, during the first half of the twentieth century, pretty much the only arena in which blacks achieved success and cultural respect, a way of transcending their legal status as second-class citizens. Davis’ words are congruous with Mahon’s argument that musical genres are a tool for policing racial categories, “a way of attacking the absence of authenticity, and indicator of familiarity with contemporary black cultural norms” (Mahon 10). British music critic Charles Shaar Murray puts Mahon’s idea more bluntly in his observation that “the central thrust of twentieth century American popular music [is] the need to separate black music (which, by and large, white Americans love) from black people (who, by and large, they don’t)” (Murray 86). Eric Clapton’s rebuff of Jimi Hendrix’s showmanship, articulated earlier in this chapter, exemplifies this policing. Clapton, a white man, believed that he was entitled to perform blackness, but was uncomfortable with watching Hendrix, a black man, perform that same blackness in parody.

Sure enough, Eric Clapton exemplifies Murray’s point during his 1968 interview for *Rolling Stone* (the cover of this issue was examined earlier in this chapter), in which he espouses his racialized perception that Jimi Hendrix’s showmanship was incredibly
inauthentic: “Everybody and his brother in England still sort of thinks that spades have big dicks. And Jimi came over and exploited that to the limit, the fucking tee. Everybody fell for it. Shit. I fell for it” (12). As Adelt explains, many music critics see Hendrix as transcending race at the same time that his performances exaggerated racial stereotypes to the point of minstrelsy. “Apparently, Hendrix’s overt play with racial stereotypes,” Adelt continues, “which might have been at least partly liberating for a musician who did not fit labels like ‘black,’ ‘white,’ ‘British,’ and ‘American’…was distracting Clapton’s purist view of the blues” (Adelt 441-2). Clapton, in his own view, could adopt any performance style that pleased him, but felt that Hendrix was “putting on an act” if he did the same.

As with Abbie Hoffman’s cover image featured on Issue 55, the photograph of Joe Conforte on the cover of Issue 122 likewise appears socially acceptable, even though he is depicted as a pimp, because Conforte, as a white man, occupies a social position which allows him to exploit black stereotypes and still appear authentic. Conforte, notorious for working to legalize prostitution in Nevada during the 1960s and 1970s, operated “Mustang Ranch,” the country’s first legal brothel. The cover depicts Conforte in the front seat of a car, flanked by three women, presumably prostitutes. One of the three woman gazes seductively at the camera while Conforte dangles his hand down her blouse. A fourth woman in a bikini, the only African American of the group, poses on the roof of the car, lying on her side. The headline for the story inside reads: “The Crusading Pimp: Joe Conforte’s Fight to Keep Nevada Clean.” The title of the story within the issue, “A Concerned Citizen’s Fight to Keep Prostitutes Off the Streets of Nevada,” contains a similar word choice and tone to the cover headline.
Though both the headlines on the cover and within the issue seek to highlight that Conforte is an activist for sex worker’s rights, the title “Crusading Pimp” indicates that *Rolling Stone* wished to portray him as a kind of missionary seeking to “civilize” animalistic hookers on the street. While proponents of legalizing prostitution, including Conforte, cite that regulating prostitution is “cleaner” vis-a-vis working and health conditions, the cover photo still objectifies the women who, the photo suggests, work for Conforte. The visual composition of the cover photo celebrates his status as a sexual entrepreneur; the layout of this cover photo, along with the “Superfly” headline in the corner, explicitly references blaxploitation films of the 1970s and seems to place Conforte on a pedestal as a sort of sexual king. Conforte is a White Negro because he’s depicted along the lines of the stereotyped black pimp. At the same time, unlike a black pimp, this white man is shown to be performing a civilizing service for humanity; he’s cleaning up the streets—as opposed to working as a pimp, which is probably how an African-American in the same pose would have been received. Conforte is also assuming a role in pop culture that was previously occupied by black characters such as Shaft or Superfly.

Through “sanitizing” prostitution and being portrayed as a powerful, sexualized “pimp crusader,” Conforte’s visual presentation conforms to Mailer’s discussion of the White Negro making “an ethical differentiation between the good and the bad in every human activity from the go-getter pimp (as opposed to the lazy one) to the relatively dependable pusher or prostitute” (Mailer 10). For Mailer, a black drug pusher is simply that: a lowly drug pusher. Comparatively, a White Negro can perform the role of a pimp or a pusher and still maintain his integrity if he is a pimp or a pusher who has a good
work ethic. As a White Negro, Conforte enjoys a flexibility and dignity in his job as a pimp that a black man would never have the luxury of experiencing.
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III. EPILOGUE
Appropriation post-1980

With increasing frequency throughout the 1970s, white musicians and celebrities featured on the covers of *Rolling Stone* conformed more and more to Norman Mailer’s visceral aesthetic descriptions of the White Negro, while the few blacks that *Rolling Stone* included on covers from this time were visually depicted quite statically. By the mid-1970s through the end of the decade, *Rolling Stone* covers were “embedded in a vision of black identity as an essence, a static category that transcend[ed] time and space,” and the depiction of African Americans on covers from the time reflect that limited vision. Issue 197 (Oct. 9, 1975) [Fig. 2.7], for example, features an image of Muhammad Ali in profile, surrounded in an oval—as presidents appear on dollar bills—which makes him appear antiquated and static. Considering that Ali is a champion boxer, one would expect him to be rendered with more of a primal aura. Why is he not pictured in boxing gloves and shorts, perhaps, or with the kind of sweaty, visceral physicality that we saw in Tina Turner and Jimi Hendrix’s photographs? Ali’s is a case where that kind of depiction is called for. By not featuring his physicality, *Rolling Stone* turns Ali into an abstract, a symbol, just as a dollar bill is in essence a symbol of currency (and not gold or silver). *Rolling Stone* uses an illustration to depict him, which removes all his vivacity and fleshiness. It is as if his physicality, which is very much tied to his being a boxer, was extracted in order to infuse movement into photographs of White Negroes.

The way Ali is pictured works for *Rolling Stone* on two levels. First and foremost, the flat image removes his literal physical being and personal currency from the cover of the magazine—and thus, American society as a whole—by placing him in the past, in the
good company of dead U.S. presidents. Secondly, and perhaps more abstractly, that Ali’s
cover resembles American [monetary] currency renders his iconic importance to the
African American community ubiquitous. Like a dollar bill, his [racial] worth can be
freely exchanged for cultural capital; *Rolling Stone* turned Ali’s race and status into a
commodity that they could then sell to the white American public. This kind of
appropriation is what rapper and actor Ice-T refers as an act of “cultural colonialism,”
whereupon the fruits of black culture become “universal” (Maycock 3). *Rolling Stone*
manufactures Ali’s image into iconography that is universal, but it is a universality that
doesn’t uplift Ali’s status to a place of racial transcendence. Rather, the visibility of Ali’s
cover embodies *Rolling Stone*’s commodification of his race to serve the magazine’s own
interests.
Images removed due to copyright reasons.

Figure 2.7
During this period, the discontents of black artists grew as they encountered more and more limits to their creative freedom imposed on them from outside forces. While the popularity of rock music grew throughout the 1970s, and the diversity of its musical derivatives expanded, the range of music that black artists could play simultaneously became more compartmentalized. Due mainly to the structure of the predominantly-white music industry, “black music” as a category, like the depiction of black artists on *Rolling Stone* covers from the late 1970s and early 1980s, was quickly becoming more static.

Mahon explains that when white rock artists adopted black performance styles, so too did they begin their occupation of a cultural space that once belonged to black performers, and moreover, they were able to occupy this space free from the fear of racist sentiments. This appropriation was especially painful because music had always been the most important voice of black American culture.

Essentially, the cover image on Issue 523, an image of Martin Luther King, Jr. (April 7, 1988) [Fig. 2.8], puts a bookend on *Rolling Stone*’s trend of depicting White Negroes, encapsulating how total *Rolling Stone*’s appropriation of blackness had become after 1980. Five years prior to the appearance of the cover featuring King’s portrait—which offered “PORTRAIT OF A GENERATION” as its headline—*Rolling Stone* had removed any trace of animation and vivacity from Muhammad Ali’s cover image, choosing instead to depict one of the world’s premier athletes in flattened profile. Presumably, Ali was not even photographed in a studio, as his cover image is an illustration). Rather, *Rolling Stone* presents the two-dimensional profile of Ali, the African American symbol of fitness and success, in a shaded oval evocative of George Washington’s visage on a U.S. one-dollar bill.
The magazine turns race into a product again on the 1988 cover of Martin Luther King, Jr. The caption under King’s name on the cover reads: “Hero to a generation,” and while the decision to feature King on the cover could be considered progressive in that *Rolling Stone* chose to laud King as a civil-rights icon, the gesture seems specious. *Rolling Stone*’s largest readership is composed of white men. Declaring Martin Luther King the cultural hero of the magazine’s readership suggests that, as was the case with rock & roll aesthetic styles, whites can freely claim African American heroes as their own. This is not to say that a person who is white cannot identify with an African American icon, but rather that there’s an unjust irony in *Rolling Stone*, a white institution, declaring one of the most celebrated African American icons their hero at a time when black artists were so rarely featured in the magazine. The cover’s headline, “A PORTRAIT OF A GENERATION,” describes King’s portrait as a visual icon belonging to a generation of *Rolling Stone* readers. But arguably, King’s image is a portrait of *Rolling Stone*’s generation-long practice of racial appropriation, not a reflection of his heroism to the magazine’s readership.
Images removed due to copyright reasons.
IV. CONCLUSIONS

*Rolling Stone* covers operate as more than visual publicity for the artist or personality they feature. In American culture, the cover of *Rolling Stone* has functioned during the twentieth century as the most prestigious visual space for rock artists to garner public attention. Perhaps more than any stage or amphitheater, the covers attach a symbolic import to a rock artist’s image and like the performance of rock and roll itself, the covers are just as hyperbolic. But because of *Rolling Stone*’s importance and stature within the music industry, the magazine’s covers played a major part in contributing to the confinement of African American artistry by visually conveying—and thus popularizing—a very narrow story about race and rock and roll history.

Through the magazine’s trend of featuring White Negroes, *Rolling Stone* was undoubtedly complicit in producing images that undercut the success and visibility of many talented African American artists. Arguing that White Negroes’ appropriation of black performance styles was a form of cultural borrowing is certainly possible, but it’s also undeniable that this kind of appropriation caused a sizeable population of talented black musicians to see something they created be taken away from them. *Rolling Stone*’s erasure of black authorship, to be sure, was especially painful because music had always been an incredibly important voice of black American culture.

The publication capitalized on the rich opportunity that White Negroes offered the magazine: a chance to appeal to a larger white audience without sacrificing African Americans’ contributions to rock music. We have seen the ways in which early *Rolling Stone* covers exploit the sexualities and physicalities of performers such as Tina Turner and Jimi Hendrix, and how this physicality was appropriated. In other words, black
performers went from being stereotyped on *Rolling Stone* covers, to being rendered invisible and abstract. By the early 1980s, the whitewashing of the rock and roll industry, and the marginalization of black musicians within it, had become increasingly acute. During this time many African American artists exhibited similar frustrations toward the rock industry’s treatment of race, and *Rolling Stone*, I believe, participated in the segregationist practices common to rock industry that Mahon details in *Right to Rock*:

> White and black were mixing at a significant cultural level, but racial hierarchy was still very much in effect. Overall, access and opportunities were better for white performers. Black performers struggled to get a fair chance and were confined to inferior contracts, resources, and opportunities. In the end, with their greater visibility and a growing white fan base, white artists took over rock ‘n’ roll… (Mahon 148)

The “glass ceiling” that African Americans experienced in the music industry was part of a larger economic and social climate that adversely affected minorities in the United States during the second half of the twentieth century. In *Representing*, Craig Watkins explains how, during the 1960s, the Democratic Party’s enforcement of new civil-rights legislation magnified the black-and-white racialization of the two major political parties in the U.S. “Conservative activists monitored the political landscape of the middle to late 1960s,” Watkins explains, “and correctly gauged the evolving mood of white resistance to the assertions of civil rights groups” (Watkins 25). Watkins goes on to describe how conservative politicians then crafted “a series of strategies” that
successfully redistributed social and economic resources across racial lines during the 1980s. Thus, the economic and social landscape of America during this period compounded the struggles that black artists were already experiencing in a segregationist music industry.

White rock artists’ appropriation of black performers’ styles, occupation of, and eventual domination over, a previously black cultural bastion, then, was all the more accentuated. Amid a political climate that increasingly sanctioned social policies which favored corporate interests and ignored those of lower class minorities, white musicians’ cooptation of music styles, which black musicians had originally called their own, became extremely pervasive and undoubtedly problematic. When black rock artists tried to further their careers during the early and mid-1980s, they came face to face with a version of the situation W.E.B Dubois described in 1903; that is, they were forced to negotiate their own identities with the mostly-white world at large (Mahon 287). The situation was such that black artists felt the need to organize an association that would allow them to work outside a music industry that had set definite boundaries defining what their art could sound like. As Mahon puts it:

By the time the BRC was founded in 1985, the white appropriation of rock was so complete that it was counterintuitive to imagine blacks playing rock at all. The interplay of miscegenation, segregation, and appropriation had so muted rock’s blackness that black musicians had to insist on the right to rock. (Mahon 148)
Though some cover photographs of bands and musicians during the mid-to-late 1980s depict white artists performing certain models of “blackness,” images of White Negroes appeared only sporadically on covers of *Rolling Stone* issues during the last two decades of the twentieth century. While it’s certainly plausible that the BRC’s activities caused *Rolling Stone* editors to be more cognizant of unjust power dynamics relating to racial appropriation, it seems more likely that White Negroes’ diminished presence in *Rolling Stone* can be explained by the fact that trends of white appropriation at this time were shifting away from rock music and toward other genres in the music industry: namely, rap, heavy metal, and hip-hop. These were musical genres that *Rolling Stone* hesitated to cover favorably. Thus, racial appropriation is not unique to *Rolling Stone* and rock music; appropriation trends have simply become more prominent in other music genres.

In his introduction to *Everything But the Burden*, a compilation of essays based around a common discourse of race and cultural appropriation, BRC co-founder Greg Tate describes hip-hop culture and the hip-hop marketplace as a cultural space for all black ideologies (Tate 7). That *Rolling Stone* balked at embracing new sounds not only speaks to its inflexibility and shortsightedness, but also the publication’s unwillingness to involve itself with a type of music that was racialized as black. Tate admits that some artists in the African American community “see the appearance of the w igga\(^{10}\) mutant as a comical form of flattery, others as an up-to-date form of minstrelsy” (Tate 8).

Tate’s writing evokes a problematic situation that still exists in American culture, which is that the authenticity of one’s race is seen as something that can be debated. Race

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\(^{10}\) A portmanteau of “white” and “nigger,” used, at least initially, within rap and hip-hop contexts. Loosely equivalent to the term “white negro.”
is not a static category; African Americans—and white ones too, for that matter—do not constitute a monolithic group. When will an American institution such as *Rolling Stone* come to appreciate race as the flexible and amorphous category that it is?
Appendix


Works Cited


Wenner, Jan S. "Jan S. Wenner." 
