

# The Paradox of Re-Colonization: the European Invasion of American Popular Music

## Black Music Goes Mainstream in the 1960s

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### Social/Political Background

*Black power, state repression, and black communities of resistance*

- The period from 1968 to 1972 → **state-sanctioned repression against African-Americans** (blatant attacks on the Black Panthers, shooting of students at Jackson State College in Mississippi and point of view black power appeared limited and uneven: by 1980 less than 1 per cent of elected officials in the

*“By speaking of communities of resistance, I am suggesting that various class, generational, regional, and ideological communities embraced the Civil Rights or Black Power movements as legitimate symbols to organize based on local struggles. [...] Understood in full context, the growth of the Black Panther Party and other black nationalist organizations represented the emergence of diverse communities of resistance that were not necessarily formal members of any political organization, but that embraced the codes and symbols of black nationalist rhetoric.” (Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*, 1999)*

Southern University in Louisiana, assaults on prisoners at Attica state prison in New York) → being a dissident (and black) was very dangerous; → restraints of black political expression reduced the black protest movement to “dated and uncritical tropes of black empowerment and masculinity”; from a political

United States were black despite the fact that the black population comprised over 11 per cent of the total; “schizophrenic phase in the black freedom

### What's Going On



*“With *What's Going On*, Gaye, with the assistance of modern recording technology and a bevy of cowriters, crafted a musical tome which synthesized the acute issues within black urban life, with the prophetic and existential vision of the African-American church. [...] Dealing with the personal demons of drug addiction, depression associated with the death of singing partner Tammi Terrell, and his brother Frankie's service in the Vietnam War, Gaye produced a singular protest statement readily accessible within mass consumer culture. [...] I maintain that the centrality of Gaye's recording to the black protest tradition and mass-market culture should be interpreted as one incarnation of the non-violent mass civil disobedience that Martin Luther King demanded shortly before his death.” (Neal, 1999: 62-3)*

struggle" (Ward, 1998: 344);

- Amidst this social and political turmoil, Marvin Gaye records and releases what later became **the prototypical black protest recording**: *What's Going on* (1971). Gaye's recording exerted a major influence on later artists who recorded compositions from the recording → this reflected a certain commitment to musically enhance the black protest tradition of the 1960s and early 1970s.
- **Music perceived as a form of resistance** → "specific social problems elicit a musical re-

"The Beatles sent limos to the airport to pick up the entourage and tried in vain to arrange for a jam session, but they were in the midst of finishing up their long-awaited Sergeant Pepper album and were never able to do anything more than attend Carla Thomas's show at the Bag O'Nails, where, upon meeting Steve Cropper, the four Beatles stood in unison and bowed from the waist."  
(Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*)

sponse, which in turn reinforces public attitudes" (Herbert I. London, *Closing the Circle: A Cultural History of the Rock Revolution*) → the creation of the so-called "communities of resistance"; "the period of 1968 – 1972 was probably the most significant period for music devoted to the dominant themes of black struggle and social movement"; → the rhythm and blues of the later 1960s and early 1970s was full of songs explicitly about the struggle, about the social, political and economic plight of black

### *To Europe They Went The raviest, the grooviest, and the slickest*

- The first official Stax-Volt tour of Europe in the spring of 67: "Just in case you haven't heard – the Stax Show must be one of the raviest, grooviest, slickest tour packages that Britain has ever seen. And if you haven't seen it already – pull your finger out!" (New Musical Express, March 18, 1967) → almost all British papers, with the exception of some, heralded the arrival with headlines so that the interviews, reviews, and expressions of faith were so laudatory as to be almost embarrassing; yet there were also dissenting voices, Bill Millar, critic and fan, wondered if Eddie Floyd's "overriding talent is to see how many times it is possible to cram 'Let me hear you say yeah' into three

Americans, and about the state of American race relations;

- **Corporate annexation of black music**: "to market soul music, if not blackness itself, to a young mainstream consumer base and as a purveyor of youthful sensibilities for older audiences, but also as a measurement of racial and social difference" → the mass commodification of soul reduces blackness to a commodity that could be bought and sold (Neal, 1999: 94);

### Short bibliography:

Nelson, George. *Where Did Our Love Go? : The rise & fall of the Motown sound*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987.

Guralnick, Peter. *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and blues and the southern dream of freedom*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1999.

Ward, Brian. *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and blues, black consciousness, and race relations*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Neal, Mark Anthony. *What the music said: Black popular music and Black public culture*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

London, Herbert I. *Closing the Circle: A cultural history of the rock revolution*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1984.

songs"; he was also concerned that Otis's vocal style was becoming increasingly mannered, his gestures aiming at pleasing the crowd rather than expressing authentic emotion;