

BOOK REVIEW

## A whiter shade of pale

**Just around midnight: rock and roll and the racial imagination**, by Jack Hamilton, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2016, 352 pp., US\$29.95 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-6744-1659-8

Jack Hamilton's *Just Around Midnight* poses a tantalizing question about American popular culture in the decades after World War II: why did rock and roll, a musical genre that roared into the world as an interracial endeavor in the 1950s, become the property almost exclusively of white Americans as it transformed into rock by the end of the 1960s? A few years after countercultural musical icon Jimi Hendrix died of a drug overdose in 1970, critic Margo Jefferson wondered if it "was the latest step in a plot being designed to eliminate blacks from rock music so that it may be recorded in history as a creation of whites" (2). By the end of the 1970s, on the eve of Ronald Reagan's presidency, a mostly white, male crowd rioted at "Disco Demolition Night" at Chicago's Comiskey Park. At this infamous 1979 incident, rock and roll's explosively joyous miscegenation of sound, style, and culture now detonated with reactionary rage. On the surface, the anti-disco position was in opposition to perceptions of a "phony" mode of commercialism, but barely concealed below that surface were intense antipathies to blackness, women's equality, gay culture, queerness, or any other deviance from a strictly heterosexual, white, patriarchal norm. It was this virulently hyper-masculinized whiteness, oddly positioned as outlaw rebellion, that came to dominate "classic rock" as a genre and a sensibility.

Hamilton strives to reveal "how rock and roll music – a genre rooted in African American traditions, and many of whose earliest stars were black – came to be understood as the natural province of whites" (3). In doing so, *Just Around Midnight* provides a prehistory of what, by the 1990s, became known in pop music criticism circles as "rockism," or the privileging of rock as the *ur*-genre of popular music and the only proper way to make pop matter as art, politics, and culture. Hamilton begs to differ. To do so, he probes two aspects of the "naturalization" process by which rock became enshrined as the kingpin of pop music genres. First, he focuses on what he believes caused "rockism." This is a story of "audience and discourse," of the mediation of rock and roll by record companies, critics, and fans themselves. When celebrating black music, these figures and the language they used repeatedly sorted out racial categories through a certain construction of "authenticity" that almost inevitably worked to the benefit of whites and notions of whiteness. "Audience and discourse" are the villains of Hamilton's tale of how rock became white.

But there is another aspect of Hamilton's study, too. He also develops a "counterhistory" in which musicians continually troubled the positioning of rock as white during the 1960s. In ways often forgotten or overlooked, the musicians and their sounds cut across racial boundaries. Recovering their efforts, Hamilton emphasizes how they critiqued or rebelled against racial categorizations and hierarchies even though they never quite transcended or overturned the existing racial order. The book uncovers many fascinating, underappreciated examples of musicians and music challenging racial norms. Inspired by the young Bob Dylan, who himself drew from black musical traditions, singer Sam Cooke aspired to make music that was at once pop and political. The Beatles were not competing with the Rolling Stones, as many now tell the story of the "British Invasion," but instead were

in dialog with artists and songwriters at Motown, whom they admired as brilliantly astute commercial and esthetic music makers. Teddy Boys, the British subculture that gave rise to the Beatles, embraced rock and roll as interracial music, but possessed a highly racist attitude on postcolonial black migrations from the British Empire to the United Kingdom. By the late 1960s, the singers Aretha Franklin, Janis Joplin, and Dusty Springfield sometimes shared the same repertoire, but critics repeatedly placed them into separate racialized categories of “soul” (read: blackness) that distorted the actual range and richness of the music they created. Jimi Hendrix and Santana resisted these sorts of “racial confines” (235) by becoming non-white rock stars, but their careers also revealed the persistence of the “racial imagination” into the late 1960s and early 1970s. And the Rolling Stones, along with Hendrix, probed the linkages between race and violence during this same time period, at once raising questions about this linkage even as their music continued to evoke it.

These musicians and their music are the heroes of *Just Around Midnight*. But whether it is the bad guys of “audience and discourse” turning rock white or the good ones of musicians and music in a “counterhistory” to the bleaching of blackness out of rock and roll in the 1960s, Hamilton wants us to glimpse the dynamism of the “racial imagination” at work. Borrowed from an influential essay collection published in 2000 and edited by musicologists Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman, the concept of the “racial imagination” suggests a process by which music pushed at the limits and constraints of race in America (with brief forays to the United Kingdom), yet was constantly thrown back into a stubbornly unremitting privileging of white identity. For Hamilton, this occurred despite the fact that many participants celebrated black culture and sounds as musically and politically potent. They could be celebrated as such, he shows, but only in ways that in final form enhanced whiteness.

Behind the concept of the “racial imagination” as Hamilton employs the term is the “enormously powerful and enormously vague conceptual engine” of “authenticity,” which, in his view, resided at the foundation of the “rock ideology” (14). “Authenticity,” in Hamilton’s telling, concerns not only

an understanding between performer and audience that what is being performed and expressed is ‘real;’ ‘but also’ functions as a way of delineating what constitutes ‘real’ rock music, including who is authorized to play that music and who is authorized to talk about and listen to it. [14–15]

Authenticity, in other words, is the force driving the construction of boundaries and walls for sounds and audiences. It generates the frameworks and structures for feeling and thinking about musical genre and music in general. Authenticity is the note to which all the other rules, guidelines, attitudes, sensibilities, and opinions get tuned.

At times in *Just Around Midnight*, this “rock ideology” seems a bit too fated, predestined, and overdetermined. The book could benefit from more careful delineation between overtly reactionary conservative examples of white supremacy and more liberal modes. On the one hand, there was the anti-black civil rights backlash to rock and roll, found most obviously in efforts by groups such as the Southern Citizens’ Councils to boycott “Negro music.” On the other, there were the more subtle, but perhaps more damaging and long-lasting forms of liberal racism forged through “rock music’s musical-racial ideology of white authenticity” which, for Hamilton, “has long taken its power precisely from the fact that it conceals and outwardly denies its own existence” (25). These two are quite different. Hamilton’s main concern is mainly with the latter. For him, liberal racism was far more responsible than reactionary attempts to hold the line on Jim Crow for making rock white. He might have identified this focus more clearly.

More troublingly, in analyzing the liberal racism buried in rock’s whitening, Hamilton offers a frustratingly circular logic. This is hardly his fault. It is a quality that *Just Around Midnight* shares with much recent scholarship on popular music and culture. The circularity is this: the

urge for achieving authenticity drove the racial imagination of rock, rendering it white; at the same time, the overriding need to imagine rock as white was what fundamentally shaped its urge for authenticity. In short, rock became white because whiteness created rock. This is not wrong, of course. Music and race are two aspects of culture that mutually constitute each other, as Hamilton is quick to point out. But there is something inadequate about this as a causal answer to his book's central inquiry into what caused rock to become white. If rock became white because it was driven by ideologies of whiteness, what more is there to explain, really? At times in *Just Around Midnight*, it is as if white supremacy was always lurking in the wings of the Fillmore Auditorium, a melanin-deficient guitar-god soloist who stomps out onto historical centerstage to play a wanky *deux ex machina* solo. In a screech of masturbatory Marshall Stack amplification, he drowns out the magnificent, far more delicately wrought ensemble work that went into all the other musical efforts to overcome racism in the 1960s. And the critics, whether through or driven by their discourse, love him for it. For instance, the Rolling Stones and Jimi Hendrix undertook "pioneering experimentations with musical violence" that could "be heard as critiques of encroaching white hegemony," but these bold-as-love moves were "ultimately appropriated and absorbed by rock ideology in order to confirm its own white masculinist exclusivity" (23). You can't always get what you want, I guess.

Which is all to say that the details and overarching point of *Just Around Midnight* ring true, and profoundly so. "White masculinist exclusivity" was indeed there from the start with rock, and perhaps even with rock and roll (as a side note, as this phrase suggests, sexism repeatedly duets with racism in *Just Around Midnight*, but it often takes second fiddle as a theoretical concept, the rhythm guitar to racism's lead). Yet the underlying argument starts to resemble Hamilton's evocative description of the dramatic start to the Rolling Stones' 1969 track about race and revolution, "Gimme Shelter": "an explosion into a quagmire" (265). We see the terrors committed. We glimpse the love turned to theft in the name of authenticity. We track the frustrating repositioning of blackness as the source of cultural innovation rather than the central story. As with much recent historical research on the 1960s, we learn quite a bit about the details of lost opportunities and are reminded of an unswerving deeper logic that seemed to doom them from the outset. What we never quite see is the light at the end of the tunnel in terms of how to sort out what was inescapable and what was historically contingent. The book's real question is, in the end, rhetorical: how could rock have become anything but white?

Is music a social activity capable of altering ideology, or are its sound merely a reverberation of deeper vibrations in the shifting tectonic plates of the "racial imagination"? When blackness gets paradoxically and recurrently romanticized to further white supremacy, how exactly do we understand rock and roll's aspirational, utopian, and sometimes extraordinarily palpable transformational possibilities – its potential capacities to shake and rattle the past into the future? How do we connect rock and roll to the seemingly implacable stasis of racial privilege in American music and culture? In turning to the interplay between rock and race in the 1960s, *Just Around Midnight* reminds us that even when satisfying causal answers prove elusive, it is always worthwhile to look back and try to listen better to a moment when a new genre of popular music seemed ready for a brand-new beat, yet ultimately settled for a whiter shade of pale.

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