



## The Sixties

A Journal of History, Politics and Culture

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsix20>

# Tear down the walls: white radicalism and Black Power in 1960s rock

by Patrick Burke, Chicago, Illinois, University of Chicago Press, 2021, 256 pp., US\$27.50 (paperback), ISBN 9780226768212

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To cite this article: Michael J. Kramer (2022): Tear down the walls: white radicalism and Black Power in 1960s rock, *The Sixties*, DOI: [10.1080/17541328.2022.2056844](https://doi.org/10.1080/17541328.2022.2056844)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17541328.2022.2056844>



Published online: 25 Mar 2022.



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## BOOK REVIEW

**Tear down the walls: white radicalism and Black Power in 1960s rock**, by Patrick Burke, Chicago, Illinois, University of Chicago Press, 2021, 256 pp., US \$27.50 (paperback), ISBN 9780226768212

As the late critic Greg Tate noted of American popular culture in general, white rockers of the late 1960s seemed to take “everything but the burden” from Black musicians, cashing in on Black musical forms without having to endure racism, exploitation, or worse. Yet, Patrick Burke asks in his thoughtful, well-researched, measured new book, *Tear Down the Walls: White Radicalism and Black Power in 1960s*, what about the relationship not only of white rockers to Black music, but also to radical Black politics during the countercultural era? In response to this question, Burke pursues a rigorous historicization of the late 1960s rock moment, seeking a “middle ground between condemnation and celebration of white performance of Black music” (12). Burke contends that white rockers most of all pursued what the African American activist Eldridge Cleaver grudgingly approved of as “soul by proxy.” They did not seek to become Black in an offensive act reminiscent of the minstrel show, but rather they hoped to “embody the soulfulness and righteousness that they associated with blackness” (15). While this was sometimes a hippie update of Eric Loft’s infamous “love and theft” of Black culture by white performers and their audiences, it also could become more than that, according to Burke. At their best, which they often were not, white rockers did not merely steal blackness for their own purposes, but rather wove Black music and politics into a technicolor countercultural tapestry that honored these prominent and powerful strands in radical American life and hoped to advance them in positive, compelling directions.

To be sure, in borrowing from Black music and staying attuned to radical Black politics in the late 1960s, white rock musicians did not, as Burke shows, manage to tear down the walls of racism. Boundaries of all sorts remained firmly intact. Nonetheless, they did, Burke believes, sometimes offer vivid glimpses of the very barriers that blocked effective white support for Black culture and Black lives. And occasionally, white rockers even made music that seemed to leap, for a moment, over the stockades that prevented Black musical and political ideas from flowing into a larger mass movement for Black liberation as an essential component of a broader countercultural movement for change. Most of the time, however, white rockers fell short. Their failures, however, do not stop Burke from holding aloft the cigarette lighter of rock’s antiracist potential. This is no small thing within recent historiographic trends. These either dismiss the “rockist” framework for the study of popular music entirely, claiming it overemphasizes the genre’s prominence in American culture, or grant the importance of rock, but then contend that it did not live up at all to radical ideals of freedom and equality. While scholars such as Steve Waksman, Nadya Zimmerman, and Brian Ward and earlier critics such as Amiri Baraka (Le Roi Jones), Ishmael Reed, and Margo Jefferson take white 60s rockers to task for their cultural appropriations and at times outright exploitations of Black music and musicians (not to mention their exoticization of other cultures, from Native Americans to Asians, their sexism and homophobia, and their middle-class naïveté about working-class lives), Burke refuses to stop at just

calling 1960s white rockers hypocritical racists. He does not disagree with critiques of white rock, but he does insist on complicating assumptions about what white rockers were up to in their historical moment. For Burke, his close examination of evidence suggests that “there was more to the racial dynamic of popular music during the late 1960s than a simple conflict between appropriation and resistance” (17).

His five chapters in *Tear Down These Walls* embrace the complexity of rock’s keen interest in blackness. He focuses on the Detroit rock band MC5’s inventive relationship to the Black Power Movement and Free Jazz. He looks closely at the ironic ways in which during a Jefferson Airplane television appearance, lead singer Grace Slick donned blackface as a form of self-conscious cultural and political protest. He explores the presence of race in Jean-Luc Godard’s film, *One Plus One*, which captured the Rolling Stones developing the studio recording of the song “Sympathy for the Devil” alongside staged scenes of Black Power readings and revolutionary activities. Burke investigates the battle over demands that promoter Bill Graham give over his Fillmore East venue in New York City for free community concerts and political rallies in the ethnically diverse neighborhood of the Lower East Side. And he traces how after the Woodstock Festival in upstate New York, countercultural activists sought to envision a Woodstock Nation, as activist Abbie Hoffman called it, for American youth – one that might be modeled after the separatist theories of a colonized internal Black Nation within the United States as well as romanticized understandings of Native American tribes.

One of the biggest payoffs of Burke’s close attention to historical context is that he notices how cognizant a number of white 60s rockers themselves were of the fraught nature of their musical borrowings across the color line. While some, such as Mick Jagger, could be utterly clueless, others were more self-reflexive. The MC5, for instance, created heavy rock versions of Pharoah Sanders’ “Upper and Lower Egypt” (retitled “Upper Egypt”) and John Lee Hooker’s “I’m Bad Like Jesse James” (retitled “I’m Mad Like Eldridge Cleaver”) that were not mere imitation, but rather continual, layered versions that responded to the originals and took them in new directions. Here was not appropriation, but rather what ethnomusicologist Ingrid Monson calls “intermusicality.” Burke writes that “the MC5 challenged their audience to hear is a self-conscious variation of Black music mobilized to serve a particular political agenda in a specific historical moment,” in their case radical expressions of solidarity with Black suffering in a racist America, particularly in their hometown of Detroit (41–42). Similarly, while Grace Slick’s use of blackface as protest during a Jefferson Airplane television appearance drew upon deep strands of white women blacking up to expand their own sense of freedom in a sexist society, it also, in Burke’s balanced approach, “reflected a respectful and thoughtful effort” on the part of Jefferson Airplane “not simply to revive or mimic various aspects of Black music, but to creatively synthesize them into new forms of expression” (67–68). When Slick raised her fist in imitation of the controversial 1968 Olympic Black Power salutes of Tommie Smith and John Carlos, it was in solidarity: referential rather than redirected toward her own self-portrayal. This sense of redirection, for Burke, can be heard in the Airplane’s music and lyrics as well, which took African American forms in new and fresh directions, neither abandoning them nor merely imitating them but joining the call for revolution and transformation.

By shifting the focus from musical or cultural appropriation alone (see books such as Jack Hamilton’s *Just Around Midnight* or Daphne Brooks’ *Liner Notes for the Revolution* or upcoming studies by scholars such as Matthew D. Morrison for that story) to music *and* politics, Burke reminds us that despite the many examinations of the topic, we still lack satisfying ways of explaining how popular music relates to political action. Could a genre such as rock convey political energies and messages effectively and coherently

or, in the end, will popular music's commerciality always overwhelm solidarities or affiliations established across boundaries of racism (not to mention sexism, class exploitation, and other forms of intolerance and injustice)? Are music's utopian projections capable of sustaining a practical politics or do they break down when they come up against the wall between art and reality? Is pop music capable of rocking existing structures to their very foundations or is it simply doomed to roll right back into the very forces it seeks to contest, leaving little more than the faint echo of a larger call for change in the world?

From 1960s rock to the musical soundtrack for the Black Lives Matter movement, these have been and continue to be painful questions to confront. Rock of the late 1960s is much mythologized, and therefore also easily dismissed, but Burke's fine-grained investigation of the late 1960s moment rescues lost tales, strange moments, and oddly hopeful instances from the guitar feedback of history. The small eruptions of crackling potential, of self-awareness, of utopian dreaming he brings to our attention matter because they shook the walls even if they did not cause them to come tumbling down. There is nothing soothing about the sometimes-overwhelming white noise of late 1960s rock, but Burke will not let the music's radical roar fade to silence below its problematically persistent hum of racial retrenchment. The dissonances that emerge from his carefully wrought ambivalences are a good thing.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/17541328.2022.2056844>

