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A Matter of Love and Hate

R&B's Symbiotic Relationship with the African
American Community

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Abstract

R&B, a genre rich in heritage and tradition since its origins in 1949, is currently immersed in complete ambiguity. The character which defined the genre during the 1960s and 1970s is further obscured and harder to identify in the present. Over the better part of 50 years, R&B has continued to prove to be covered under the veil of blackness, the African American community. For better or for worse, this association with blackness affects how R&B is perceived, and ultimately what it tends to be on a mainstream level. This paper attempts to investigate the extent to which R&B music shares a symbiotic relationship with the African American community. It is no secret that various historical events have defined the African American experience as a collective, but the extent to which these external and internal forces affected the music which spawned from the community is not explicit. With dutiful analysis of historical trends, economic data, sociological factors, and changing philosophical paradigms, I uncover the extent to which R&B is a genre capable of reflecting the condition of a community and driving ideologies. While tracking the changes of R&B starting in the 1960s through the present, it becomes apparent that R&B's current form is not solely the product of chance. It is the inevitable byproduct of a community, through multiple generations, sharing its condition in song, whether it is through love or through hate.

Key Words: R&B, Music, African American

Introduction

The impassioned uproar over the 2015 blockbuster hit *Fifty Shades of Grey* was a not a result of cinematic mastery or fanatic approval from supporters of the prized literary series. Surely the boiling anticipation for the film adaptation arose from a voice. Abèl Makkonen Tesfaye, better known as *The Weeknd*, catapulted from internet sensation with a considerable cult following into superstardom crooning his emotional ballad “Earned It”. The song would drive the promotion of the film, providing a salacious overtone with sweltering lyrics that would showcase a brand of music that was equally vivacious and stimulating. But this brand seemed to be an artistic advancement of a genre whose traits are becoming further difficult to distinguish from its original composition.

Rhythm and blues, better known as R&B, is characterized by ambiguity like many other music genres in the 21st century. Its elements have become indecipherable from mainstream pop, alternative, hip hop, and rap. Soulful artists such as Sam Smith and Adele are categorized under pop, when their voices and styles indicate a conviction and character similar to Tesfaye. Radio stations around the country play hip hop and rap alongside what is labeled R&B, but the distinction is still not made any clearer. Subcategories, such as neo soul, are testaments to artists crafting originality from nostalgia, borrowing elements from decades prior and mixing them with a new found energy, a spirit of the times. Over the course of the past fifty years, race appears to be a persistently inadequate variable in compartmentalizing the music into convenient categories. So can an amorphous R&B be defined? To answer that question, it is best to look at historical context.

R&B historically is a label for music whose derivation came from the African American church. According to Teresa L. Reed, *Billboard* first used the term in 1949 (p. 27). This spirited

music would come to be identified as a synthesis of gospel, big-band, swing, and blues, but would also include rock and roll, soul, rap, Nelson George claims (As cited by Reed, p. x). Reed details descriptively the systematic evolution of R&B from the walls of the Pentecostal church, whose energy could be traced with a meshing of western Protestantism and West African spirituality. Instead of focusing the scope on particulars, history proves R&B is a genre of assorted parts, encompassing multiple styles and interpretations. All of the music stated above has a quality that is unmistakably distinguishable, whether it is the exuberant delivery, the emotional appeal, infectious lyricism, musical composition, instrumental arrangement, so on and so forth. What appears today as the modern classification of R&B is a result of multiple factors that are incongruent but assimilate under the veil of blackness, the African American community.

The diaspora which is the African American community can be said to be equally as complex as the R&B music which it fosters. Concentrating observation to the last sixty years, the culture's trajectory reaches the heights of Civil Rights and Black Power to the lows of the crack epidemic during the 1980's and Ferguson. But regardless of the ebbs and flows throughout the course of history, one thing remains completely clear: however R&B is defined, it is the voice of the people. Glancing to the lyrics of "Fight the Power" by the Isley Brothers and Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On", the listener cannot help but get the uncontrollable urge to demand for rights while questioning the state of the world. Although the genre has branched out over the decades to include others from various ethnicities around the world, to its core it was and still is submerged under a black rhetoric. And for better or for worse, this rhetoric proves to be the limited filter through which the general public comes in contact with it.

Consider Amanda Nell Edgar's beautiful articulation of R&B rhetoric's impact on culture. She writes,

This rhetoric offers simplistic discussions of R&B lyrics and performances as evidence for its racially problematic stereotypes, approaching the genre from a reductionist standpoint. In other words, R&B rhetoric does not concern itself with the complex and sometimes ambivalent histories and meanings R&B carries for its listeners (p. 143).

The problem here is subtle, but worth noting. R&B rhetoric is not the entirety of R&B, yet it is inseparable from R&B, which makes its stigmas directly attached to the African American community. The importance of R&B rhetoric however does not completely lie in the negativity it perpetuates; it lies in the question it poses. To what extent is R&B a vehicle of influence as much as it is a vehicle of reflection? Edgar's article primarily focuses on the negative influence R&B rhetoric displays on culture at large, but little is offered about R&B's complete impact on the community which birthed it.

Difficulty arises when trying to comprehend this complicated dynamic. Extraneous and spurious factors abound attempting to correlate R&B's effects on a community with numerous other systemic ideologies, problems, and associations. The wellspring that is psychological and sociological literature make an effort to measure, gage, and link music's cognitive impact on behavior, but there is no theory that can declare a grand hypothesis to be irrevocably true. The inexact science of genre analysis can be frustrating and discouraging. Nevertheless, curiosity still manages to prevail. How much has R&B and the African American community needed and in many ways abused the other?

Through thorough investigation, I plan to uncover the extent to which R&B is a vehicle of influence to the African American community, to which it shares a historical, symbiotic relationship with. Three questions in particular will drive this investigation to deeper areas of inquiry. Answering each will require a method that is interdisciplinary, incorporating multiple

fields to get a better glimpse of the dynamic that exists between the music, the artists that create it, and the people who are affected by it. The questions are as follows:

1. Through examination of history, is R&B more of a reflection or a driver of influence of the African American community?

By this I am trying to discern whether particular events in history from the African American community are correlated with themes or messages located in R&B. It may not be possible to say that x caused y due to the endless factors that could motivate an outcome, but through research, it may be possible to say there is a definite parallel present between the music and the time period. This question however, goes deeper than events, songs, and time periods. What it asks ultimately requires further questions, and answers to those questions, to piece together a picture that will dutifully arrive at a conclusion.

2. Has there been a shift in the ideology in R&B? If so what are its causes?

If there has been a shift in ideology, then it would establish that this genre of multiple elements and avenues has evolved with passing time, and this evolution could be from coincidence or by intent. My assumptions lend me to believe the latter. The plan is to discover if there has been a shift in ideology, who are the motivators of the shift, and what are the reasons behind these changes? If the reasons are market forces, what events sparked them? If the reasons are political, was the ideology imposed or created? And if the contrary is true, being there is not ideological change, the task is then to understand through the examination of the music the components that support this notion.

3. Is over-sexual lyricism a reinterpretation of lust/love or more so an opiate to alleviate cultural frustration?

Over-sexualized lyrics are not necessarily a contemporary phenomenon in the African American community, but they are associated with the rhetoric of “black” music, if not all modern mainstream music regardless of color. But if sex and love are attributions specific to R&B, or if they are a part of the ideologies, then there must be an explanation as to why. Is it biological? Is it reinforced by cultural desire? Or is sex a numbing agent for other problems that continue to persist in the African American community? The challenge here is to discern how the music as a commodity plays the role of influencer and interpreter, especially in the modern era. The focus will be on how sexual lyricism changed from different time periods and comparing those changes by juxtaposing specific stanzas for study.

To answer all of these questions, meticulous efforts will first be used to shape a framework of the African American community through study of important historical events, tracing a timeline from the 1960’s to the present, highlighting key political, socioeconomic, and cultural events. In no way is it possible to do justice to a history so rich, fertile, and intricate in its threads, especially considering the ramifications of events 20 years ago are still being resolved, but in order to effectively compare a structure to its related, yet distinct, offspring, a semblance of a modeled skeleton must be attempted at. With this, discussion will venture into the disciplines of psychology, philosophy, and sociology, examining literature to see how certain components of music in general can affect behavior. Finally the components of lyrics from past and present will be analyzed, comparing and contrasting their key characteristics. Songs will be chosen on the basis of sustainable chart success within the R&B category as well as their relevant lyrical content which may speak to particular cultural events during various points in

African American history. More often than not, areas of historical analysis will help answer questions related to lyrics, and philosophy and psychology will help explain historical events and social patterns. The investigation will as a result have complimentary disciplines attempting to arrive at conclusions simultaneously.

The Weeknd is just a microcosm in the larger umbrella of R&B. What his success proves is that R&B remains prevalent for reasons that often go unquestioned. But the reasons have significant historic implications, influenced by factors that are crucial to understanding the relationship between a genre and a community that need each other for their existence and expression respectively. It is the goal to unveil the dynamics which define this relationship, discovering the root of the love and the hate.

A Song through the Decades

Testimonials offer an enormous depth in the depiction of individual stories, but some have the capacity to portray a context befitting an entire generation. William Julius Wilson in his riveting book *When Work Disappears* depends upon the stories of inner city African Americans to convey the appalling statistics of their disposition. One account in particular holds great relevance. An elderly woman states,

We had the middle class and upper middle class. It has gone from affluent to where it is today. And I would like to see it come back, that we can have some things we had. Since I came in young, and I'm a senior citizen now, I would like to see some of the things come back so I can enjoy them like we did when we first came in (p. 3).

Her account reaches back in nostalgia for prosperity in the South Side of Chicago, hoping for a revival of what was. In her old age she is able to witness the changes that have befallen upon her community since 1953, some from causes which were truly out of the control of those who found residence in the neighborhood. Nikki Giovanni, in her book *Racism 101*, articulates her vantage point beautifully during the 1960s by claiming, "My personal problem with what is called 'the sixties,' roughly that period between the Brown decision of the Supreme Court (1954) and the election of Richard Nixon (1968), is that I think we won" (p. 35). And then there are the eerily prophetic words of Wade Henderson, who envisioned Rodney King as, "the black everyman whose experiences with police came to symbolize African American encounters with law enforcement" (Gibbs, p. 22).

Through the decades, the African American community offers an erratic song sung by the voice of its people. In harmony and sometimes discordance, they provide a narrative, bolstered by evidence, which details the reality of millions. R&B will not be understood as the vehicle it was or still is if the cries of those who lived to give it vitality are not fully heard. Those voices

inspired the music which carried two generations, one through periods of protest and optimism and another whose frustrations and internal conflicts blossomed into pervasive imagery and evolved worldviews affecting listeners in the present.

“RESPECT”: Activism during “The Sixties”

The task to compress the African American experience beginning in the 1960s is nothing short of an arduous endeavor. Perhaps it is befitting to begin where R&B music most notably gained prominence during its broader cultural inception in the 1960s: the exodus from the African American Church. The church offered sanctuary for those who sought protection from hostility which engulfed the lives of African Americans from coast to coast. Many musicians in the church found solitude but also a unique form of open expression in this environment.

However, these musicians desired recognition, refusing to be confined to church exclusively.

Teresa Reed writes,

In the 1950s, crossing over from gospel to secular music symbolized the traversal of several boundaries. It was a passage from the segregated past into the integrated future, the passage from a religious life focus or a humanistic mindset, and the passage from economic limitations to seemingly infinite economic possibilities...It was an assertive departure from the religious assumptions and constraints of earlier generations (p. 111).

The urge to be liberated is a direct reflection of the Civil Rights Movement, which provided hope in the midst of prevailing hardships.

The 1960s were a time where discrimination, segregation, and prejudice served as a motivational trigger to fight injustice. *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ruled the segregation of black children in schools denied them equal protection (Olson & Beal, p. 250). The legislation did not settle opposition from the whites, as by 1962, Governor Ross Barnett called on state troopers to withhold James Meredith, a black college student, from the University of Mississippi (Olson & Beal, p. 251). Nina Simone, whose artistry developed to promote Civil

Rights by any means necessary, spoke on the condition in Mississippi in her song “Mississippi Goddamn”. She sings, “Picket lines/School boy cots/They try to say it’s a communist plot/All I want is equality/for my sister my brother my people and me” (Simone). Her riveting commentary goes on to discuss her irritation with those who stagnate the process of equality with lines “Do things gradually/do it slow/but bring more tragedy”, and “You don’t have to live next to me/just give me equality” (Simone). The idea of segregated equality is interesting to consider, particularly in a time where peaceful protest shared spotlight with more retaliatory methods. Groups such as the Nation of Islam and what would later be considered the Black Power Movement share a very similar sentiment with Simone (Olson & Beal, p. 258). What these lyrics do show is a search for respect from a society responsible for the atrocities. During a personal interview, Simone further explains, “To me American Society is nothing but a cancer, and it must be exposed before it can be cured. I am not the doctor to cure it. All I can do is expose the sickness” (Garbus). The ailments of America were not always manifest in the form of institutional exclusion or Civil Rights protest. Often, it was located right in the back yard.

Poverty for African Americans was ubiquitous while being kept an ignored topic. David Hilfiker discusses in this book “Urban Injustice: How Ghettos Happen” some of the striking details which constituted the condition of many communities during the 1960’s. In particular, his discussion of the myth of the war on poverty during the mid-1960’s is of interest. He explains how increased attention on Vietnam and the Civil Rights movement by liberals further brushed the discussion of poverty under the radar (Hilfiker, p. 13). Despite numerous reports, one of which coming from Daniel Patrick Moynihan, stressing male unemployment rates and the “tangle of pathology”, Hilfiker points out that, “There were, it seemed, no solutions” (p. 14). Consider the continuation, and worsening, of these conditions in William Julius Wilson’s study.

For example, “In 1987-89, a low-skilled male worker was jobless eight and a half weeks longer than he would have been in 1967-69” (Wilson, p. 25). Inevitably what this creates is a community, whose floor is stripped underneath it, having no place to stand. Once economic viability is taken away and poverty persists, crime and despondence tends to settle in. Interestingly enough, poverty during the sixties did not automatically evoke pessimism.

Stevie Wonders, “Uptight (Everything is Alright)” is a response to the deprivation inflicted upon his community. The opening verse is written in a way, after a powerfully sung opening chorus, to give the listener a joyous feeling. He sings,

I'm a poor man's son, from across the railroad tracks,
 The only shirt I own is hangin' on my back,
 But I'm the envy of ev'ry single guy
 Since I'm the apple of my girl's eye
 When we go out stepping on the town for a while
 My money's low and my suit's out of style,
 But it's all right if my clothes aren't new
 Out of sight because my heart is true
 She says baby ev'rything is alright, uptight, out of sight
 Baby, ev'rything is alright, uptight, clean out of sight (Wonder).

Immediately, the listener is faced with the reality of Wonder’s enviable position. His poverty is not a hindrance to his success in finding love. Wonder shifts the focus from his external condition to his internal value. His woman recognizes the sincerity of his heart; he is the “apple of her eye”. The appeal of this particular number, which was able to remain atop of R&B charts weeks after its release, is the diversion it creates. There is an address of the condition relevant to many African Americans who would listen, but there is not a lingering focus on the topic because ultimately, it pales in comparison to love. This is not to say Wonder’s career ignored the plight and effects of poverty, as he tackled such issues on tracks entitled “Too High” and “Living for the City” in 1973 (Reed, p. 131). What it could speak towards is the perpetuating

power of love which would become a continuous rhetorical tool in R&B to establish pathos with the listener, African Americans in particular. And while Wonder seems to be speaking a message in “Uptight” directed towards those who can relate to poverty, female artists found a voice by making demands to men within their community.

Aretha Franklin’s “Respect” would grow to be a nationwide sensation, inviting discussion on the state of African American romantic relationships. The generation, which forged a path for equality, was not content with those rights only being afforded to males. African American women looked to growing women’s rights movements within their own community, such as Angela Davis and the Black Panther Party, for supporting imagery to bolster their desires for respect and fair treatment in domestic relations. Bakari Kitwana writes in his book *The Hip Hop Generation*, “Our parent’s generation placed family, spirituality, social responsibility, and Black pride at the center of their identity as Black Americans. They, like their parents before them, looked to their elders for values and identity” (p. 7). So when Franklin repetitively asks for “Just a little bit” of respect, the lyrics go beyond the social and economic implications of the more obvious interpretations (Redding).

She sings, “I ain’t gonna do you wrong while you gone” and then in the second and third verses refers to her money as a possession that is “sweeter than honey” (Redding). The woman is presented as the partner fixed within the household, but not necessarily looking for her man to take care of her financial needs. She has money, freely giving it to him. All she requires is respect, but what respect looks like is never made clear. It is implied that the listener will understand. Nevertheless, if the man in this case does not give the respect that the woman deserves, he may come home “and find out I’m gone” (Redding). This message is not necessarily limited to the working class or poor couple. James Olson and Heather Olson Beal

mention how the African American upper class, “resented upper class white societies unwillingness to accept them” (p. 260). While not directly connected to spousal and romantic relationships, the heightened sense of value in relation to white superiors would certainly translate to personal affairs as well. Franklin’s message of respect, although ambiguous in the respect it demands, touches at the universal desire during the 1960’s amongst the African American community to require respect in multiple forms, whether social, personal, economical, or political.

The subliminal and outright presentation of respect in R&B music proved to be a reflection of the African American community yearning to elevate its condition above years of tarnished imagery and vacant promises. The 1960’s as a whole seemed to be decade of change, symbolizing a turning point for a people. The 1970’s proved to carryover some of the optimism present in some of the R&B during the sixties, and further conceptualized it as inevitable progression. The way this progression was delivered is a testament to the musical approach of each individual artist as well as the continuous influence of the African American church.

“Ain’t No Stopping Us Now”: Optimism and Progression during “The Seventies”

Optimism may only be a symptom to the larger subliminal motivation which carried “the seventies”. Nikki Giovanni describes the times through her perspective as, “all the sixties did, in reality, was save the political entity we know as the United States from self-destruction” (p. 36).

In a relevant parallel, James Olson and Heather Olson Beal denote the period as follows,

The black lower class faced poverty, crime, and unemployment amidst a subculture of energy and survival, a world with its own sights, sounds and values. From Harlem to Watts, the ghettos abounded with the smells of barbecued and deep-fried food, soul music from bars and pool halls, the swagger of teenagers, the talk of groups on street corners, and the sounds of Black English. African Americans felt comfortable there (p. 259).

Giovanni finds, in what is difficult to gauge as pessimism or sheer objectivity, the irony of Olson and Beal's passage. As much as the sixties were outright audacious in its movements and demands from the African American community, substantial change ceased to occur. R&B became one the outlets in which a people would find solace and comfort. But R&B could not be the source of this comfort. A much greater philosophical reason brewed under the surface. "In the 1970's, for many people Ali symbolized the hopes of African Americans" (p. 260). Muhammad Ali was the personification of the hope which drove the idea of progression. Although progression for the African American community seemed to be more of an illusion than a definite reality, the music which fostered from the period managed to create a link from the past and usher in a new era.

In 1971, Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On" proved to be an album of renowned importance, as it became the barometer of the times as well as the people. Lush with Gaye's sermonizing lyrics and comforting vocals, its primary thesis statement seems to invoke a feeling of deeper longing for what was and what ultimately should be. But this message driven style was only a product of a community ready to embrace it. Reed states,

Nonetheless, the public demonstrated its readiness to hear Gaye preach about the evils of war in the title track; they were ready for Gaye's sermon on the sins of pollution, radiation, and overpopulation in "Mercy Mercy Me," and they appreciated his empathy with the disenfranchised urbanite in "Inner City Blues (p. 129).

Vietnam was not off limits for Gaye. Astonishing inner city economic marginalization was not either. Before delivering his qualms over the times in each stanza, Gaye reiterates in "Mercy Mercy Me", "Things ain't what they use to be no, no" (Cleveland, Gaye, & Benson). It becomes evident here that Gaye is becoming a voice somewhat detached from the African American community, because while he is addressing issues particular to African Americans, he does not

choose to stop there. He is addressing a nation lost in the aftermath of World War II, trying to unmask the illusion of prosperity. Lines such as “Brother, brother, brother/there’s far too many of you dying” in the title track could be a double entendre speaking to those soldiers off fighting a senseless war or those brothers dying in the inner city streets. Nevertheless, it would be hard to justify Gaye speaking exclusively to the African American community here, considering that asking for things to be the way they used to for a people who have not necessarily shared a fortuitous past seems foolhardy and insensitive. Gaye manages to take a persistent spirit of evangelism, thriving in the African American church, and uses it for the purposes of propelling his voice and the cry of his people to America as a whole. The funk and groove movements of the seventies would also share a voice, albeit one with the intent to inspire African Americans to get up and move.

McFadden and Whitehead’s 1979 anthem “Ain’t No Stopping Us Now” refuses to dwell on the realities of the past and present, pushing African Americans to move to their own groove. The first verse alone speaks to the attempt. The artists sing,

There's been so many things that held us down.
 But now it looks like things are finally coming around.
 I know we've got a long long way to go.
 And where we'll end up, I don't know.
 But we won't let nothing hold us back.
 We're putting ourselves together.
 We're polishing up our act. Well
 And if you've ever been held down before,
 I know you refuse to be held down any more. well
 Don't you let nothing, nothing
 Stand in your way (Cohen, McFadden, & Whitehead).

The first two lines are of particular interest if compared to statistics of inner cities of the time.

Hilfiker mentions how during the mid-1970’s Northern and Midwest cities received less and less

tax support for inner cities from suburban and rural areas (p. 82). A larger portion of society was becoming reluctant to support the issues that did not affect them, leaving African Americans in the inner city to feel isolated and disregarded. And according to Olson and Beal, joblessness amongst black teenagers also affected nearly 40 percent in some cities (p. 255). So the things that “held us down” were not necessarily “turning around”. The assessment of the reality for African Americans supports the notion that some R&B singers played upon the false sense of progression previously discussed. But the duet probes at something deeper. “I know you refused to be held down anymore” and “Don’t let nothing, nothing/stand in your way” is a jolly, definite call to action. Through dance inspired production and catchy vocal arrangement, they are demanding a people to not feel sorry for themselves and look to the future for hope. Essentially, McFadden and Whitehead are hinting at the desire stirring in the African American community, that the “someday” in “Black National Anthem” is today (Johnson). There is no need to wait any longer for the happiness that could be in the future. Juxtaposed with Gaye’s “What’s Going On”, the songs methods show a definite progression in style and arrangement. Gaye is enlightening, while the duet is partially inspiring wishful thinking. Hope swelled throughout popular 70’s R&B, ushering in a developing women’s empowerment movement independent of the male approval.

1978’s “I’m Every Woman” by Chaka Khan was truly the culmination of the female voice in the African American community reaching emphatic heights. Accentuating a confidence shared by the likes of Aretha Franklin and Tina Turner, Khan sings, “I’m every woman/it’s all in me/anything you want done baby/I do it naturally” over a vibrant synthesis of guitar, synthesizer and piano (Ashford & Simpson). What is compelling is Khan’s undertone of being strong and independent without the approval of a man, and without focusing on her sexual prowess. A

century prior Franklin's "Respect" tended to demand respect because of the efforts of a domesticized woman, but Khan's message says there is no limitation, no borders for her appeal and power over a man in any form. She is ready to express "good ole fashion love" while being a helper when "danger or fear" comes way (Ashford & Simpson). In many ways, Khan is taking the "Respect" demanded for from a previous decade and flaunting its benefits.

In 1972, Shirley Chisholm's run for president showcased what Anastasia Curwood describes as the advancement of feminist ideals within "electoral and party politics" (p. 205). Two decades later, Anita Hill became a "heroine" to the black women's movement through her debate on Capitol Hill with Clarence Thompson in 1991 (Olson & Beal, p. 261). If there was a real progression, it was in the gradual steps African American women were witnessing, through politics and music, to their growing equanimity with African American men. Khan's anthem was for sure right in the midst of it. This optimism however would not manage to carry over in messages that would drive a new generation in the 1980's and 1990s.

So far I have tracked the movement of a generation within the African American community spanning two decades in their hope, motivation, optimism, and successes. A change would come however in the 80's which would have a resounding and lasting impact on a new generation of African Americans into the present. This change would appear innocuous musically, especially in the way it was convey through R&B in the form of lascivious lyricism and erotic emotional appeal. But the reasons for the change, whether political, economic, or philosophical, develop a web of complexity which makes attributing blame to any one source impossible.

“Sexual Healing”: An Opiate to the Woes (1980-2000’s)

Discussing sex in R&B music was in no way a new phenomenon or taboo during the 1980’s. Before Marvin Gaye recorded “Sexual Healing” in 1982, a wellspring of songs discussed intimacy and sexual relations during the decades prior. But the majority of the songs that maintained longevity on national charts did not present sex conspicuously. It was either alluded to metaphorically or kept covered under the pretense of love. In this way sex kept sacredness, a cherished encounter between lovers in their private quarters. Take the example of Johnnie Taylor’s “Who’s Making Love”, which asks rhetorically to a man committing infidelity who is sleeping with his wife when he is away (Banks, Crutcher, Davis, & Jackson). The blow of adultery is lessened by the phraseology of “making love”. The 1964 hit would precede the sexual revolution of the late sixties, ushering in a gradual acceptance of more suggestive approaches to the act. James Brown’s “Get Up (I Feel Like Being A) Sex Machine” of 1970 furthered the objectification of the male libido and female body, both a testament to the impact of liberal philosophy of sexual empowerment. However the 1980’s were rooted in a slightly different terrain. Changes in political fronts in Washington vastly affected African Americans over the 1980s. Drugs and mass incarceration infiltrated a community drunk from a decade of hope. And disparities in the workforce between African American women and men fueled a brewing hostility between the sexes. So although Gaye’s Grammy award winning “Sexual Healing” became a crazed cultural sensation, the hallmarked title may have been a moniker for a condition much more pressing.

Ronald Reagan's presidential term included intentions completely opposed to helping impoverished African Americans. Hilfiker writes, "Ronald Reagan was elected president in a campaign that featured fierce anti-welfare programs. His administration attempted to cut not only AFDC, but also elements of social insurance" (p. 84). Reagan depleted jobs and tax revenues, leading to a relocation of many to the suburbs (Olson & Beal, p. 261). Essentially, Reagan, and later George Bush, attempted to limit social systems of support for the inner city ghettos, eroding jobs, education, and healthcare in these areas (Olson & Beal, p. 261). The result is conveniently described by William Julius Wilson as ghetto related mentalities and behaviors which "often reinforce economic marginality of the residents of jobless ghettos" (p. 52). The draining of economic life from the inner city ghettos would further dictate the reaction of African Americans to the infusion of illegal drugs into their neighborhoods.

The crack epidemic resulted in a federal response to "The War on Drugs", pushing more African American men into the incarceration system. Crack, being an inexpensive chemical manipulation of cocaine, latched onto inner city ghettos for its high profit margins, but in the process destroyed the health of communities by stripping them of males by incarceration and physical violence. Leonard Dinnerstein et al. mentions how during the 1980's, "many young black males were either in jail or otherwise in trouble with the law (p. 224). In 1984, 80 homicide deaths out of 100,000 were recorded amongst black males ages 15-19 (Wilson, p. 61). This could be a result of the emerging of violent street gangs due to drug trafficking, which burgeoned rapidly during the 1980s and 1990s (Kitwana, p. 20). The results of young black men increasingly falling victim to the penal system and the bullet creates a community, already devoid of economic opportunity, lacking in male leadership and companionship for female counterparts.

African American women, with the absence of black men, proved to be a greater economic advantage, prompting resentment amongst men to find a semblance of superiority. During a 1988 study, 78 percent of African American women were thought to “have a better chance of finding and retaining employment because they are either more responsible and determined or have better attitudes and a better work ethic” (Wilson, p. 123). Wilson presents another table, again from a 1988 study, which attributes a 48 percent and 52.9 percent to lack of work ethic as the reason behind African American men not finding employment in clerical and blue collar work respectively (p. 118). And a study conducted between 1970-1996 revealed black women, who earned law and medical degrees, increased by 219 percent compared to 5 percent by black men (Kitwana, p. 109). With available black men limited in the amount of work they can do, and the increased education of African American women, it creates what some scholars describe as the “Endangered Black Man”. In the book *Black Sexual Politics* Joan Morgan states, “The ENDANGEREDBLACKMAN is a creature black women have learned to love, but his is not one we respect” (p. 256). Bakari Kitwana shares a quote from a young black woman who states, “Black men feel that white society is more accepting of black women and find them to be less threatening than Black men” (p. 112). During the 1980’s, the new generation of African American men and women were caught in a quandary, both needing each other and affected by similar obstacles, but growing apart in the realm of opportunity and financial stability. Musically, sex as a topic of discussion would prove to be a ripple effect prevalent in R&B.

Marvin Gaye’s hypnotizing style of simple, provocative lyrics with silky instrumentation in “Sexual Healing” would only be a precursor to other songs during the decade which would take on a similar blueprint. Lyrics such as “Let’s make love tonight” and “Cause you do it right”

share an intentional linkage to previous love anthems in prior decades (Gaye, Brown, & Ritz). But songs that would follow would offer variation to the phraseology of sex. Take for instance Freddie Jackson's 1985 hit "Rock Me Tonight (For Old Times Sake)". Where Gaye's anthem enticed through a mid-tempo groove, Jackson's methods beg and plea for another sexual encounter from an ex-lover. He uses phrases such as "Rock me tonight", "Roll with me tonight", and "I'm going to love you real good", which metaphorically describe their potential ordeal but also imagine sex to be an intense, emotional experience (Laurence). Yet the most notable line comes in the second verse when Jackson references "I really miss the way you scream and moan" which uses sexual imagery and sounds to invite the listener into an intimate space, leaving little room for imagination (Laurence). Similarly, Mtume's "Juicy Fruit" in 1983 makes use of tantalizing associations with the body and fruit, painting vivid sexual images. "Cherry blossom kiss" and "I'll be your lollipop/ (you can lick me everywhere)" invite the subject into a world where the female body and her sex are synonymous with sugary treats and edible pleasure (Mtume). Sex exists, in all these examples, under a metaphoric guise which is progressively distant from love and closer to a lustful pleasure. What this inevitably affects is the connection of a maturing generation of black men and women, one that is tenuous well into the 1990s.

No matter how good sexually driven songs from the 80's felt, it was clear one word described the relationship between African American brothers and sisters: torn. Bakari Kitwana describes what he dubs "The Hip Hop Generation" as follows,

We are a generation torn between our modern-ness and the cultural vestiges of the past. Cultural and economic forces like the global economy, e-commerce, extreme individualism, our career fixation, and the feminist revolution all converge to redefine relationships between young black men and women. Of course, the same issues played themselves out in American society in general. However, the tensions for hip hop generations have been especially intensified because of socioeconomic disparities (from

unemployment to incarceration) young Blacks have faced in contrast to their white counterparts (p. 89-90).

It may be necessary to clarify the potentially problematic paradox of sexual healing, since sexual behavior requires connectivity, at least from a physical standpoint. What I am proposing is that by the late 1990s, the African American community started to separate at the seams culturally, and R&B music as a result reflected this separation by the perpetuation of historical stereotypes and misogynistic gender roles. Amanda Nell Edgar argues these stereotypes and gender roles in R&B music, or R&B rhetoric, carries “sweeping generalizations about the genre and its meanings” (p. 140). I do not wish to reduce R&B in any capacity; however, R&B rhetoric, which is widely accepted to categorize hip hop, R&B, and anything remotely black, should not be reduced to racist labelling attached to African American’s by white culture. R&B rhetoric is and was a simultaneous reflection and driver of African American culture during the 1990s and 2000s. It abused sex for chart success without foreseeing potential consequences.

To fully actualize the historical implications of R&B rhetoric and how they reflected the image of African American men in the 1990s, look no further than Rodney King and O.J. Simpson. The 1992 police beating of Rodney King brought an array of controversy and criticism. Dennis Schatzman characterized King as being, “Just this black guy that might have done something wrong” (Gibbs, p.45). During 1994, the polarizing trial of OJ Simpson brought Ellis Cose to say, “What it reveals about our own stereotypes and anxieties—many of them unacknowledged—about violent black men, about interracial sex, about the price of admission to the mainstream world” (Gibbs, p. 116). Both of these cases illuminated the external and the internal perceptions of African American men. As Edgar claims, R&B rhetoric historically is rooted in the portrayal of the Black male sexuality as, “dominating and dangerous” (Edgar, p. 143). If the trials of Simpson and King told America nothing else, it was that African Americans

had reasons be afraid and furious. They existed as a microcosm to explain the condition of the 90s for a majority of African American men, and these realities would be witnessed in R&B music.

In 1994, R. Kelly and Janet Jackson were both symbols of the evolving landscape of the R&B charts. According to Billboard.com, Kelly's "Bump N' Grind" and Jackson's "Any Time, Any Place/And On And On" held the top position on R&B charts for twelve and eleven weeks respectively (Billboard). The wide appeal of these singles would further continue the critical belief of black men and women's "insatiable and animalistic sexuality" (Edgar, p. 143). This view of black sexuality, already degrading, would become more fragile when understanding its root. Patricia Hill Collins notes, "Their masculinity remains fragile because it is predicated upon female subordination" (p. 257). Kitwana furthers this point by stating, "The wide visibility of sex in popular culture, often as a selling point, demeans sex and takes it out of context. All of this has certainly contributed to the throw-away mentality that some young Black men have concerning their female peers" (p. 103). The objectification of black women as subservient sex objects is apparent in "Bump N' Grind". The outright honest sexual nature of Kelly's entire LP "12 play" would be a platform for other songs of similar format later in the decade (such as Sisqo's "Thong Song" in 1999). Jackson's female perspective in "Any Time" provides a unique contrast to objectification from the black male gaze. Jackson's proposition reveals the deeper gains of black feminism during the 1990s, demanding sexual autonomy at the expense of greater respect from African American men.

Jackson's demanding lyrical overtones reverse conventional sexual superiority, providing a perspective from black women exuding hyperactive confidence. Seductively, Jackson paints a blood rushing picture of a public encounter with her and her lover. She sings,

I don't wanna stop just because
 People walkin' by are watchin' us
 I don't give a damn what they think
 I want you now
 I don't wanna stop just because
 You feel so good inside of my love
 I'm not gonna stop no no no
 I want you (Jackson, Harris III, & Lewis).

Her words are a manifestation of the extent of black feminism 15 years past Chaka Khan's "I'm Every Woman". Within that time span, women's recognition of their self-worth extended beyond their abilities to be financially independent and intrinsically beautiful without a man's approval. Indeed, the congealing of American feminism and the Sexual Revolution created an atmosphere outside of the African American community which pushed the internal economic, social, and political factors previously mentioned to their extremes. Jackson's lines, "I don't give a damn what they think/ I want you now" points to a sexual aggression characteristic of black female and male relationships within R&B rhetoric. Edgar quotes Collins (2004) by stating, "Aggressive African American women create problems in the imperfectly desegregated post-civil rights era, because they are less likely to accept terms of subordination" (p. 138). These lyrical trends would continue to represent the permeating effect of R&B rhetoric on the African American community during the 1990s.

During the heart of the 1990s, this evolving perception of African American relationships, one where men and women jostled for sexual superiority, was not something which was widely repulsive, evident by the weeks of chart success from Kelly and Jackson alike. African American flocked to hit singles such as "Scrubs" by TLC and "Pony" by Genuwine, both platinum selling records, which detailed the requirements for partnership and raunchy sexual invitations respectively from male and female artists (Billboard). Even if these singles were promoted by White record executives, out of touch with the complexities and histories of

R&B music as Edgar notes (p. 143), it was not as if the African American community stood with pitchforks in protest. To be fair, the market for R&B music has never limited itself to black consumers; executives such as Berry Gordy focused marketing for Motown Records to “mainstream” white suburban youth during the 60s (Reed, p. 129). But it was not as if the widely popular R&B music was a façade of the issues present between African American men and women. These images were real and inescapable, and the more they were replicated on a national scale, the more likely they would be irreversible. By the end of the 1999, Sisqo’s “Thong Song” introduced the new millennium, one where R&B and its subject matter grew more variable, polarizing, and paradoxical. Because the health of the music and the number of units sold were not necessarily positively correlated. Neither was the state of the African American community.

The first decade of the new millennium seemed to present an inevitable reality for the African American community post 1980s and 1990s. Dinnerstein, Nichols, and Reimers present facts which conveniently summarize the black economic experience. Unemployment rates remained double of whites; black women although earning equal to that of white women, earned less than white males (p. 224). In 2012, the median wealth of white families was \$110, 729 compared to \$4, 955 for African Americans. (Dinnerstein et al, p. 225). By these numbers, the racial equality imagined by 1960’s Civil Rights and 1970’s hope looks to be obsolete. Of course there were other wider cultural issues that directly or indirectly affected the African American community and music industry. The creation of Napster, LimeWire, and other pirating music services radically altered the landscape for all music. Music sales in general declined immensely, leading to a shift in how music would be advertised and distributed. Artists who once could bank on platinum selling albums in the 1990s would grow accustomed to opening week numbers

of 50,000 units sold. In 2008 the worldwide recession limited the amount of free dollars afforded to those who chose to continue to buy music. All of these factors influenced the quality and marketing choices by R&B artists, but what seemed to persist was the gradual shift in how “sexual healing” and R&B rhetoric would be presented.

R. Kelly, rightfully revered for his contributions to R&B through his mastery of creating sultry bedroom anthems while seamlessly interweaving inspirational and religious rhetorical devices, is the symbol for male artists who found prominence during the 2000s. If Gaye ushered in “sexual healing” during the early 80s, Kelly made sure to take the torch and run with it. *TP-2.com*, released in early late 2000, received generally positive reviews from critics who grew to respect Kelly’s unique interpretation of lust. One critic noted, “*TP-2.com* is a magnum opus of the genre, milking both Kelly's recent reflection and his baser inclinations for all they're worth” (Caramanica). When analyzing tracks from the LP such as “Feelin’ on Yo Booty”, “R&B Thug”, and “Strip for You”, it makes the reviewers perception of R&B that much more reduced. If “magnum opus” of R&B consisted of Kelly’s sexual advances, club rocking booty groping, and personifications of misogyny and the ghetto, then the trends of other male artists to follow would not seem overly surprising. Trey Songz’ *Ready* released in 2009, followed an almost identical model with tracks such as “LOL ☺”, “Pantie Droppa”, and “Neighbors Know My Name”. R&B rhetoric surely did not encompass the broader range of topics included on the charts during the decade, as artists such as Alicia Keys and Mariah Carey held chart positions with their songs strictly about love with “You Don’t Know My Name” and “We Belong Together” during 2004-2005 (Billboard). The issue, as Edgar also discovers, is that the R&B male artist became almost synonymous with sex appeal, utilizing it as the primary market driver to their audience. “The buck”, as Edgar describes, is the perpetrated animalistic image ascribed

to African slave males and reconfigured to fit modern usage in the music industry (p. 144). The subliminal war of the sexes from the 80s and 90s did not die either, and black women would look to assert themselves musically to answer to the sexual demands of their male counterparts.

Beyonce's R&B and pop anthem "Single Ladies" drew in critical and popular success during 2009, notably for its concern regarding of marriage and relationships. Michael Cobb, in his riveting analysis detailing the state of singles in the 21st century, writes about Beyonce's hit, "Her song helps train us to want the thing that hasn't worked before: the broken couple rather than the terrible status of the haunted, and most likely lonely single" (p. 8). Beyonce, as Cobb notes, pities the man who chooses to let his woman get away without putting a ring on it. Consider her lines, "Is a man that makes me, then takes me/ And delivers me to a destiny, to infinity and beyond/ pull me into your arms/ Say I'm the one you own/ If you don't, you'll be alone/ And like a ghost I'll be gone" (Stewart, Nash, Harrell, & Knowles). Her vision of a suitable man is one who elevates her to a reality beyond her current state, from single to married, from rich to poor, etc. But when compared to the rhetoric which R&B males in the 21st century are delivering, her wishes do not seem to be met, which makes her song title that much more ironic. Like other anthems previously analyzed lyrically, the song is a reflection of gender relations within the African American community without even trying to be. Black single women are uniting out of necessity, not desire.

For another example, look to Keisha Cole's "I Should've Cheated" released in 2005. During the chorus, Cole sings, painfully composed, "I might as well have cheated on you/ As much as you accuse me of cheating/ I might has well have lied to you/ As much as you accuse me of lying" (Jones & Parker). Cole, regretting her faithfulness, is contemplating the accusations from her lover are merely a projection of his iniquities. Instead of a man's inability

to commit, Cole is highlighting his inability to be faithful. But how can a man be faithful if, like R. Kelly and Trey Songz, he is too busy being a harmonizing thug and a “Pantie Droppa”? Never mind the economic and political factors which make being a fruitful and healthy African American couple difficult, but to add in the driving forces in music which, from both male and female artists, paint a picture of women yearning for something a man either cannot give or is unwilling to.

“Sexual Healing” grew to represent a painful reality under the surface of the African American community for three decades. Under the eroticism was deep rooted pain, inspired by factors that abounded external from the black experience, which created a sound that can still be heard in the present, with its faint rifts and mellow croons. African Americans truly wanted to love one another, whether physically or emotionally, but through the music was a festering hatred, a hatred of each other, and the conditions that affected them. During the present, a community is still trying to rehabilitate from the opiate, still itching for its fix, knowing it cannot give up the melodic lust cold turkey.

Conclusion

By tracing a storied timeline of the African American experience from the 1960s through the present, the intention was to flesh out the complete symbiotic connection between the African American community and R&B music. Breaking down the time periods by decades and further ascertaining generational similarities and differences helped make sense of specific themes associated with trends and styles expressed in the music. Each research question tried to uncover how much the African American community depended upon R&B, and inversely how much R&B effectively demonstrated the totality of the black experience. The findings helped to support some of the original assumptions, while merely scratching the surface at the magnitude of others.

The 1960s and 1970s proved to be eras of considerable achievement and empty hope which definitely affected some of the music which would follow. The Civil Rights movement pulled African American musicians out the church with aspirations similar to that of the Baroque period in the 1600s, breaking free of societal confinements and demanding racial equality. The music which resulted would follow the trajectory of Civil Rights by demanding action and respect from white culture and also from within the community between the sexes. The difficulty when writing this section was to objectively see how R&B holistically was a reflection of particular events. While I found success locating songs which were responses to actual events happening around the time of release, examining the charts of a decade provided so much variability in songs which held number #1 chart positions. The depth to the African American experience through music is almost unquantifiable. There did seem to be common factors though, which would persist in my investigations. Throughout the two decades, and the fifty

year period for that matter, the charts told a story of a community bursting with stories and journeys, finding their way through relationships, and not just romantic ones. Their poetry was that of triumph, euphoria, heartache, and turmoil. The 1970s were the novella of hope. Funk, with its groove, disco, and bubbly rhythms, inspired a community to dance in joy of legislation passed and a promising future, even if current status quos were not immediately fixed. R&B's force as a driver during the 60s and 70s was in many ways entangled in its reflective character. Attempting to determine if philosophies were pushed or motivated through music by other factors became inexact speculation, especially when discerning where the shift in ideology in R&B sprouted from.

When discussing the thirty period of "Sexual Healing", I found I was answering two of my original assertions. The section was originally intended to diagram the gradual moral degradation of R&B through sexual subject matter by outlining the factors which caused it. When attempting to explain this however, I was actually simultaneously pinpointing the source of the ideological shift. The ideological shift can be argued to be located at different points in history, but for the purposes of brevity, its seeds were being sown during the late 1960s and early 1970s and they truly did not sprout until the heart of the 1980s. Ironically the 1980s highlighted the beginning maturation of those who compose the "Hip Hop Generation". The forces which affected them would grow to be reflected in R&B and hip hop culture in particular. The extent to which the music was a numbing agent is unclear. The hypothesis that overly sexual lyrics would become medicine, or poison, was not fully proven or refuted. Instead, it was more so redirected. Sexual lyricism and its evolution through the 90s and the 21st century are only a symptom to larger relationship woes which exist between society and the African American community and moreover men and women within the community. The unfortunate aspect of this

apparent truth is that it is so subliminal that contemporary culture fails to recognize it. If R&B rhetoric has been a driver, it has been the driver of negative stereotypes, incomplete, racist depictions of a culture whose journey is much fuller and richer than advertised.

To make these findings relevant, it might be helpful to end where I began with the *Weeknd* during the introduction. His song entitled “I Can’t Feel My Face” shot up charts using the similar, signature formula used on previous projects. Before his chart success with “Earned It”, Tesfaye gained recognition with his free download LP “House of Balloons”, which would become the foundation to his musical adventure. Bursting with pill popping references, one night stands, and internalized reflection, his ambient sound created a world of emptiness, where any form of connectivity to love or people is transitory and swallowed by drug induced numbness. Yet in 2015, his hit “I Can’t Feel My Face”, outlining his “family friendly” rendition to past drug induced eroticism, ceased to make a hiccup in his broader cultural appeal. And ultimately, an artist identified as R&B represented a genre. But did he represent the history of the people which would give him the platform?

Today “mainstream” R&B is a shell of what it was, and the answers to understanding this shell lie in the immense history of the African American community. To revive a genre latching onto the remnants of the past and the present trends of hip hop culture, it will take further investigations like this one to delve deeper in sociological, psychological, and economic factors that currently affect the African American community. I have only treaded water, giving a comprehensive overview of some of the factors which contributed to some of the issues, but in no way have I completely given adequate solutions. The African American community is the source which gave life to the keys, vibration to the vocal chords, percussiveness to the drums, air to the saxophone, elegance to the bass guitar, harmony to the heartache, reason to love, and

motivation behind the hate. Ultimately, if efforts are not made to mend the community, then R&B will be left in the ambience, puffing out noise, but left empty.

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