

Racial Capitalism in the American Music Industry: *Billboard* Charts as a Catalyst for Change

by Max Lavinsky

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Ryan Bañagale

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The phenomenon of popularity is a mysterious thing. While seemingly intangible, it guides our daily lives in numerous ways. The clothes we buy, food we eat, all the way to the slang we use are all influenced by societal popularity, whether we are conscious of this or not. At the core of all behaviors of consumption lies the guiding force of popularity. In the world of music, *Billboard* charts are given the daunting task of providing us with a physical representation of this force. For the last 80 years, *Billboard* magazine has been gaging the habits and preferences of the American audience, and ranking current music accordingly. As I will illustrate, charts do not only reflect popularity, but they facilitate and create it.

The troublesome past of these charts is saturated with racism, theft of intellectual property, and artistic subjugation. At its origin, charts were racially segregated, and even after the desegregation of charting, musical artists of color were often trampled by their marketable white counterparts. Despite this, *Billboard* charts remain incredibly relevant as they have become an integral part of the music industry. The charts inform key players in the music industry as to what is popular and therefore profitable at the current moment. This strong and influential connection between the industry and charting speaks to why charts have only increased in importance and centrality in the modern world of music. However, it is often overlooked that charts tell us far more than simply what is popular at the moment.

The sheer influence and power of the charts in the music industry, in conjunction with the racial subjugation and white supremacy ingrained in the practice of charting, make them a valuable point of analysis for the music industry as a whole. Due to their centrality within the music industry, charts only serve to uphold a white supremacist status quo. To study charts is not just to study which artists or which songs happen to be popular at a given point in time, nor is it simply a study of *Billboard* as a publication. It is instead to study the insidious past of the

American music industry. It serves as a tool to examine how racial oppression and segregation has not dissipated over time, but have instead become more latent and assumed new appearances. Charts allow us to study recent musical history and better understand why music consumption is the way it is today. Through their history and sustained relevance, *Billboard* charts become a valuable point for critical analysis of the pervasive racism present in the current state of the music industry.

In this paper, I examine the history of *Billboard* charts, as well as tabulation methodologies and the relevance of charts in industry feedback loops. I will illustrate the ways in which the self-perpetuating relationships between charts and music consumption upholds systems of inequity. This focus on charts will serve as a case study for greater innate racism and bias in the music industry, and I will ultimately explore this as it applies beyond the music industry and to the entirety of American economic and social life. I utilize theories of Racial Capitalism to serve as a framework in examining how charts reflect deep seated systemic racism not just in music, but in the American economy at large. This framework allows us to see the ways in which the racially motivated practices of the charts are intrinsically linked to Capitalism. I argue that charts continue to be organized on racialized terms today, perpetuated by racist ideologies ingrained in the industry. In concluding, I offer potential steps to bring about substantive change, in an attempt to challenge racism within the music industry and bring about transformative justice.

HISTORY OF “RACE RECORDS”

To utilize *Billboard* charts in illuminating systemic racism in the music industry, chart segregation must be identified as an inheritance of the past. By 1920, the American music industry was engaging in various marketing models for the sale of music to the public, catering

to both broad and more localized markets, as well as strategically creating distinct genres. The two most significant of these distinct genres would be that of “Race Records,” alongside “Old Time” or “Hillbilly” music.

“Race Records” and old-time records became separated from the general popular music category, they were marketed differently and given their own record catalogs. This marked a truly pivotal change in the approach of the music industry towards its consumers. The separate catalogs given to these categories suggested that there was a “correspondence between consumer identity and musical taste” (Miller, 199). This practice operated under the assumption that certain segments of the population would enjoy certain kinds of records. This narrowed the ways in which the music industry viewed musical taste in its consumers. These new designations launched a fresh way of organizing popular music, and by extension, a way of organizing the American public. This approach was far more specialized than anything the music industry had experienced in the past, in that previously, the sales model for records had assumed that individuals had broad music tastes (Miller, 188). Now, the idea that specific demographics could be catered to with specific kinds of music guided marketing tactics.

Most notable of these designations was that of “Race Records,” which was assigned to anything recorded by black musicians. This denomination assigned to the music of black artists ultimately planted the seeds of later chart segregation. “Race Records” tended to be blues, gospel, and jazz records that were seen to only have value among black consumers. There were a plethora of ways in which the denomination of “Race Records” was demeaning and damaging to black musicians, not to mention being widely restrictive. The diverse array of music contained within the umbrella of “Race Records” was held together solely by the fact that the music was created by black musicians. In this way, “Race Records” were not at all a musical classification,

but a racial classification. Additionally, record label executives actively refused to let black artists record music that did not adhere to corporate conceptions of black music (Miller, 189). Therefore, this category of “Race Records” was not necessarily reflective of black audiences, but instead reflected the perceptions that white record executives had of black music.

This new classification also served to undermine the integrity of black music. It became widely evident that there was an upsurge in the demand for black music and a growing black consumer base, however, the music industry “remained deeply committed to interpreting black music as an extension of minstrelsy” (Miller, 195). Farcical cartoon illustrations that caricatured black bodies were utilized as cover art and in advertising campaigns for new “Race Record” releases. This was of course far from being a new practice, and was reflective of minstrelsy. This illustrates the way in which the music industry was unwilling to defy conventions of segregation despite the new upsurge in the trade of black music.



Fig. 1: Minstrel imagery utilized to sell “Race Records,” alongside one of the first Billboard magazine “Race Records” charts. Image courtesy of Blackhistory.com

SEGREGATION OF *BILLBOARD* CHARTS

Billboard released its first music charts in 1940 centered around the “hit parade,” a chart ranking the most popular recordings of the time. This general popular music chart would later be renamed the Hot 100. There were also specific genre charts, which ranked the most popular recordings within specific styles of music. In this first 1940 chart release, all music from black artists fell into a genre chart named “Race Records.” By the 1940s, however, musical trends and recording activity had changed greatly, and racial overlap was more prominent than ever. The swing craze of the 1940s reshaped the relationship between white Americans and black music. The environments in which swing was being played and danced to were still segregated, but for the first time white and black people were seen as part of the same movement (Wald, 144). White fans adopted black trends beyond solely musical terms, and the influence of black culture became prevalent in the language, clothing, and attitudes of young white people. This was not at all in a minstrel sort of way, but was instead “white hipsters emulating black people rather than mocking them” (Wald, 145). This however does not denote racial harmony, of course as everything was heavily segregated and white supremacy underpinned all aspects of life. It is around this time that *Billboard* changed the name of the chart from “Race Records” to “Rhythm and Blues,” casually known as R&B (Wald, 148).

Regardless of changes in the nomenclature associated with black music, black artists were excluded from popular music charts. Charts remained thoroughly segregated until the 1950s, at which point the appeal of black music had become substantial among white audiences, and thus the crossover hit was born. The term crossover refers to a song belonging to a specific

genre chart (like R&B), that becomes popular enough to crossover from its specialized chart onto popular charts.

“Race Records” sought to sell to white audiences that were interested in Southern black music, however, this distinction kept black music separate from the mainstream, even if it was being purchased by white consumers. Contrastingly, crossover hits were the first time that records from black artists appeared on popular music charts alongside popular white artists, hence, entering the mainstream. While crossover hits served as an opportunity for black artists to achieve success and recognition by mainstream American audiences, they also opened the door for “hijacking hits” (Coyle, 136).

CROSSOVER SUCCESS AND HIJACKING HITS

When songs from black artists on the R&B charts would cross over to popular charts, record labels began casting their white artists to cover these tracks. When released, these white covers would then displace the black originals, effectively taking their place. This practice was referred to appropriately as “hijacking hits,” by music scholar Micheal Coyle (Coyle, 136). Hijacking hits exemplified a degree of exploitation that transcended basic market opportunism, as it not only benefited the perpetrators, but was dramatically detrimental to the black artists’ whose songs were stolen. These white “hijacked” records actively halted the success of black R&B records in the mainstream sphere, and subsequently caused black artists to suffer financially.

In this way, crossover success and hit hijacking were very interrelated phenomena. Crossover success, which started out as a hopeful means for the desegregation of charts and music consumption, was exploited by record executives to give birth to the practice of hit hijacking. Coyle notes that hijacking exploited racial inequality, but did not necessarily arise

from it (Coyle, 144). Record labels were not hijacking hits because they necessarily thought that white versions were any better. However, they knew that the same songs performed by white musicians would sell in greater quantities among the white audiences, and hijacking provided a means to effectively exploit racist disparities in the American consumer base.

BAKER GIBBS CASE STUDY

The epitome of hit hijacking exists in the songs of black R&B singer, LaVern Baker, and the label Mercury Records, who used white vocalist Georgia Gibbs to hijack Baker's tracks. Baker had a background singing blues, and she wrote and recorded many hit R&B singles in the 1950s with Atlantic Records. Atlantic marketed her as a pop/novelty singer to boost her potential for crossover success. However, as Baker's songs grew in popularity and sold records, rival label Mercury Records saw the profit potential of these tracks and began to cover these tracks with white vocalist Georgia Gibbs. This started with Baker's 1954 hit, "Tweedle Dee," and continued with many more subsequent singles. Under the guidance of Mercury, Gibbs continued to cover Baker's songs in the future, displacing Baker from the charts and ultimately causing Baker to lose money in royalties.

This dynamic became truly unsettling in the ways in which Gibbs was guided to not just cover Baker's songs, but to clone them. Mercury would hire the same studio musicians from the original Atlantic recordings to recreate these songs, and they would reproduce the same musical arrangements as the original piece (Coyle, 143). Furthermore, Mercury would encourage the backup singers from Atlantic to coach Gibbs to "imitate every nuance of Baker's vocal phrasing" (Wald, 176). This is perfectly reflective of Imperial Records' owner Lew Chudd's hijacking slogan, "don't improve it, copy it" (Wald, 175).

Baker was understandably outraged by this dynamic. This phenomena actively lost her money, while proving to be incredibly lucrative for Mercury and Georgia Gibbs, granting her acclaim, success, and popularity. Gibbs was able to make more money and prevent Baker from well-deserved success simply because Gibbs was white. She was more marketable to the American masses, but more importantly, she was far preferable to Disc Jockeys (DJs) and radio programmers who would not play black artists for white audiences. This is of such importance because DJs and radio programmers determined how much (if any) airplay tracks got, and radio airplay was a crucial factor in early chart tabulation methodology. Due to this, Baker was wiped from the charts while Gibbs soared to the top.

This demonstrates the way in which hijacking exploited racial inequality, but did not necessarily arise from it. Record labels like Mercury benefited from a racist consumer base and industry that would reward them for exploitative behaviors. They knew that the same songs performed by white musicians would sell much better among the white masses, and hijacking served as a tool to exploit racist disparities in the American consumer base. This case study of hijacking hits alludes to two very important components of music charting that are also integral to examine in the study of chart segregation: chart tabulation methodology, and the self-perpetuating nature of the chart/industry relationship.

TABULATION METHODOLOGY

Just as hijacking displays how artists of color were systemically disadvantaged, so do chart tabulation methodologies, or in other words, how charts are systematically listed and compiled. Popular music charts such as the Hot 100 draw from multiple pools of data, like record sales and radio airplay, to form an all-encompassing chart. There is no need to consider where exactly these listens or plays are coming from, or who exactly is listening, as it is simply trying

to reflect the American audience as a whole. Specialized data measurement tools were developed to help *Billboard* track sales and airplay easily and accurately, such as the Nielsen Soundscan system, which placed barcodes on record packaging and sent sales to a database at each sale. Additionally, the Nielsen Broadcast Data Systems monitored radio activity and tallied airplay for records. However, when it comes to genre charts, and specifically in looking at R&B, it becomes far more challenging to formulate adequately reflective charts. Ideally, genre charts are not meant to track a particular style of music, but instead the core audience of a certain style. The labels on genre charts have always “had more to do with the audience than with the music” (Wald, 237). Considering that R&B was a genre created and maintained by black artists, and that the R&B consumer base was largely black, the chart ideally represented the musical tastes of black communities.

The way in which charts were tabulated became a topic of interest in the late 1950s and 60s when white artists began accounting for hits on R&B charts. Now, some music historians would likely interpret this as a confluence of black and white tastes (Wald, 180). However, this was not the case. As music from black artists became more appealing to white audiences, DJs and record stores that previously served primarily black clientele began serving throngs of white teens. However, these radio stations and retailers continued to report their airplay and sales in the R&B market. This meant that songs could top the R&B charts without attracting black fans (Wald, 180). This destroyed the credibility of a chart devoted to black-derived music. R&B charts became reflective of mainstream white consumption, as opposed to the habits and tastes of the black audiences the chart claimed to represent. This was caused by *Billboard's* tabulation methodology of the time, which lacked specificity.

Faced with this problem of the white infiltration of R&B charts, *Billboard* announced that the R&B charts would be tabulated differently, with a focus on the style's core constituency (Wald, 181). This led to the disappearance of the R&B chart for over a year in 1963. When the chart returned in 1964, it consisted almost exclusively of artists of color. Music journalist Chris Molanphy asserted that the new chart had been "refined to focus more closely on record sales and radio listening by actual R&B fans" (Molanphy). This new chart was seen as adequately vouching for black-oriented music business. The new R&B chart, alongside its new tabulation methodology, had careful limits on what sales and airplay counted towards it. For airplay, it focussed on specialized R&B stations instead of the top 40 stations that had inaccurately skewed charting results in the past. In tracking record sales the new methodology concentrated on mostly black-owned retailers who catered to the optimal authentic R&B consumer base (Molanphy).

The revamped tabulation methodology for genre charts in the 1960s would bring multiple decades of what many scholars consider to be accurate and representative charting, in that it accurately reflected the tastes of core R&B fans. In the 1990s, the advent of soundscan technology was additionally beneficial to R&B and new Hip-Hop charts, in that it gave a highly accurate representation of genres that had previously gone underreported. Issues of adequate tabulation methodology, however, get far more complicated in the age of digital music consumption and streaming. Prior to streaming, *Billboard* could target specific audiences by limiting data to specific music retailers or radio stations. However, streams are anonymous, so it becomes far more challenging to target core audiences. The 1964 chart transformation highlighted the tastes of black listeners, but this task became exponentially more challenging in the digital age.

The Apple music store opened in 2003, and by 2005 digital sales were being included in the tabulation of *Billboard* popular music charts. For almost 8 years, *Billboard* resisted adding digital consumption data to both Hip-Hop and R&B charts. Chris Molanphy theorizes that this was because you cannot distinguish white customers from black customers when it comes to streaming and digital purchase (Molanphy). In this way, *Billboard's* resistance to integrating digital sales to R&B and Hip-Hop charts displays an overracialized approach to profiling demographics captured in charting. However, it is also important to consider that while the consumer base should not be racially segregated, tabulation methodologies should strive to be reflective of the communities they represent. The goal is to promote and reflect a historically and fundamentally black art form (like R&B or Hip-Hop), charting should accurately reflect the black communities that are responsible for the origination and sustained creation of these art forms.

In 2012, *Billboard* overhauled Hip-Hop and R&B charts to incorporate digital sales and streams. However, this proved to be very problematic and misrepresentative. Now, tabulation for genre-specific charts used the same methodology as the Hot 100, intaking data from a wide variety of sources, with no regard to core fan constituencies. This meant that genre specific charts became derived from the Hot 100. Molanphy refers to these genre charts as “accordion charts,” as they were just the Hot 100 with the elimination of all songs that supposedly didn't fit into the given genre at hand (Molanphy). This subsequently changed the culture of these charts, and created serious issues in that it required *Billboard* to engage in subjective work with vast implications. *Billboard* magazine, who is supposed to be an objective chart-maker, now has to play the role of subjectively deciding who qualifies for each chart/genre. This left just a few people at *Billboard* to shape the charts that supposedly reflected the music consumption of large

demographics. There were serious implications within genre charts, as black radio stations and record sales were gagged by the consumption habits of the white American masses.

This created repetitive trends, reduced the accessibility of reaching the coveted number 1 spot, and perpetuated a trend of more artists charting multiple songs annually (Watson, 180). Charts were skewed by favoritism towards radio-friendly tracks, and brutally failed at reflecting the artists at the core of these genres. Crossover success became impossible under this tabulation methodology as pop audiences began determining genre charts. In other words, this new methodology didn't just keep specific genre artists off of popular charts, but it displaced them from the genre charts they should have appeared on. This meant that artists with impressive genre-specific airplay could not compete with pop tracks that now leaked into their genre's chart. This was detrimental to specialized genre artists, but also to the fans of these genres. The fans that genre charts claimed to represent were justifiably angry, as Taylor Swift topped country charts, T-Pain topped Latin charts, and PSY's 2012 hit "Gangnam Style " topped Hip-Hop charts. Beyond just feeling misrepresented, this insufficient charting proved detrimental to fans in the way in which it influenced the future development of these musical styles, as I will illustrate in my analysis of charting/industry feedback loops.

Chris Molanphy gives a comprehensive analog for conceptualizing how tabulation overhaul impacts charts, through the example of senatorial elections in the United States. Imagine if instead of holding elections specifically for these senators, we just took each state's presidential vote and redistributed the democratic and republican votes among the two corresponding senate candidates. This system would change the outcome of close races, and it removes voter agency. This process would ignore candidate specifics, voter turnout, and party-switching, all of which have an impact on the way we vote (Molanphy). In the context of

charting, the Hot 100 plays the role of this presidential vote, and genre charts the role of senators. This electoral analog displays the election of senators being derived from the presidential vote, just as genre charts became derived from the Hot 100. Like senatorial elections should be separate from presidential elections, tabulation of genre charts must exist separately from the tabulation of the Hot 100 and other popular music charts.

Tabulation overhaul removes the agency of the specific audiences of these genres, placing all the power in the listening habits of the mainstream. The methodological changes made by *Billboard* stripped charts of diversity and closed up cultural space, effectively homogenizing the American consumer base (Watson, 180). We can explicitly see here the ways in which tabulation methodology contributed detrimental and oppressive dynamics upheld and perpetuated by the charts. However, charts uphold systemic racism in the music industry due to more than just their tabulation methodologies, most centrally, in the feedback loops they form in the music industry.

INDUSTRY FEEDBACK LOOPS

Billboard charts occupy such a specific and important role in the music industry, and in many ways, the industry has grown and developed with the influence of charting at its core. *Billboard* charts are a way in which we can bring order to consumption behaviors, which are often not easy to track. Due to the fact that they effectively rank and measure musical consumption, *Billboard* charts document changes over time, and they can even allow us to better understand socio-cultural issues and institutional practices (Watson, 169). In this sense, they become an invaluable tool for analysis and examination of the music industry, and the cultural climate of American society at large. Charts can be used to inform us who is privileged or disadvantaged within the institutional practices of the industry (Watson, 186). The most dramatic level of importance occupied by *Billboard* charts, however, is that of the curatorial level. Charts

serve as curators of popular music culture in that they form a feedback loop with the music industry at large and create self-perpetuating cycles.

Billboard charts reflect popularity back to the music industry, and the industry acts accordingly. Record label executives and radio programmers make key decisions based on information communicated via the charts. Then, after record labels, artists, radio stations, etc. have acted in a way that adheres to the charts, the charts once again reflect back results, constituting a positive feedback loop.

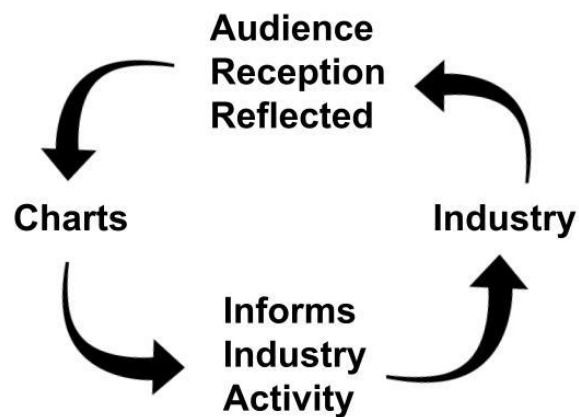


Fig. 2: The positive feedback loop created between charts and the music industry.

In this process, inequity becomes self-perpetuating, constantly being reinforced by charts and reflected in industry function. When the curatorial process of chart formation changes, there is the potential to alter genre identities and definitions, which can have serious cultural implications. The room for subjectivity in charting is inherently dangerous and problematic in this way, which is why striving for equitable charting entails purely objective data sources. The continuous nature of this cyclic relationship continues to systemically disadvantage black, indigenous, and people of color. Artists of color are not reflected in the charts, which perpetuates

the exclusion of artists of color in the industry. The curatorial processes in which *Billboard* charts function do not simply document cultural inequities, but it actively perpetuates them.

Billboard charts also work to develop and uphold notions of cultural memory. Repeated appearances of an artist in the public arena increases their cultural presence and makes them familiar to viewers and listeners. It is no surprise that when a certain demographic of artist is of decreasing presence, it alters to public perception of who is contributing to a genre of music (Watson, 188). This is particularly poignant in the case of rock n roll, in which black artists and the blues were kept out of the commercial front of rock n roll. Blues was seen as a predecessor/foundational roots of rock, but not part of the current movement, which was dominated by white men (Wald, 239). In a stereotypical glimpse at the history of Rock N' Roll, one often thinks of a concentration of white male bands, as opposed to the black musicians who actually pioneered and shaped the musical style. Due to the fact that charts participate in shaping and upholding notions of cultural memory, they contribute to the rewriting of history and public perceptions in this way.

RACIAL CAPITALISM

After conducting a thorough study of the history of chart segregation, crossovers and hit hijacking, there can be no question that the American music industry was built on racial inequity, both explicit and latent. Racial subjugation and injustice have been prevalent at every turn, as the industry and music have evolved. Many of the perpetrators of appropriation and theft were not doing so out of racial motives, but they were instead simply beneficiaries of a deeply racist system. To bring about any sort of substantive change, even in the most subtle of ways, it is crucial to understand the inherent nature of racism in the industry, and how in many ways it is intertwined with the very systems that allow the industry to continue to operate and function.

The deeply embedded nature of racism and white supremacy in the music industry are reflective of the inherently racialized and racist nature of the US economic functions as explained by Racial Capitalism. The theory of Racial Capitalism provides a stellar framework in engaging in critical analysis of the music industry, encompassing deeply ingrained systemic racism and its economic implications. Racial Capitalism is a theory introduced to the public by Cedric Robinson in his seminal work *Black Marxism*. From the colonization of the Americas, in hand with the Atlantic slave trade, racial subjugation and oppression have been at the core of our economic processes since the European discovery of the Americas. Racial Capitalism asserts that the entire American economy is built on racial differences, and that “racial subjugation is not just a special application of the capitalist process, but rather central to how Capitalism operates” (Davis, vii). This framework demonstrates the ways in which white supremacy plays a guiding role in the capitalist processes of extraction, wealth accumulation, and dispossession.

Racial Capitalism highlights the ways in which the past of the United States remains incredibly relevant and influential in the present, and how the white supremacist underpinnings of the nation are far from faded and continue to influence the economic activity of today. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke on how slavery served as the blueprint for the economic exploitation that characterizes modern American Capitalism. The remnants of slavery and colonization are still incredibly prevalent in American social ideology, and we see it manifest in many forms, such as the general callousness to poverty many Americans exemplify (Jenkins, 14).

In the introduction to *Histories of Racial Capitalism*, Destin Jenkins highlights that since capital has never accumulated without the presence of racial inequity and white supremacy, these dynamics will always be present in the economic functions of the United States (Jenkins, 3). The theory of Racial Capitalism refutes the idea that racism simply ails the economy, because this

assumes “race” and “economy” to be separate things (Park, 27). This theory instead asserts racialization to be an innate feature of the capitalist market. Race and the economy therefore are not separate entities, but are very interdependent. There is no capitalist market that is not informed by race.

APPLICATIONS OF RACIAL CAPITALISM IN MUSIC

Theories of Racial Capitalism have extensive application to many of the unjust practices within the music industry and provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the desegregation of charts and hit hijacking. Charts are considered to have “desegregated” when black artists began to achieve crossover success and appear on mainstream charts with predominantly white audiences. While this could seem like it constituted the inclusive expansion of American listening habits, it instead opened the floodgates for white people to profit off of and dominate a black artistic sphere. This is reflective of Racial Capitalism, in that it demonstrates the renewability and profitability of white supremacy. Racial Capitalism informs us that white supremacy inherently underpins Capitalism, and in this case, the capitalist system at play allowed for white supremacy to simply take on a new form, albeit more subtle. While chart segregation was an explicit display of racism, and desegregation should have been beneficial to inclusivity, the durability of white supremacy reigns supreme as hit hijacking found another way for a more latent and insidious racial degradation. Thus hijacking, in conjunction with the charting of the time, accounts for an environment that does not simply reflect racial inequality, but that actively creates it.

For example, recall the example of Baker and Gibbs. Charts informed Mercury Records of the crossover potential of Baker, so they quickly paid Gibbs to cover these tracks. Baker was displaced from charts, and Gibbs attained financial success and acclaim, reinforcing the efficacy

of hijacking as an effective economic tool for white record labels. Thus hijacking accounts for an environment that does not simply reflect racial inequality, but that actively creates it. The success experienced by Mercury and Gibbs only worked to solidify racialization in music, and continued the legacy of exploitative dynamics that would take on new forms as the industry developed. This example demonstrates how racialization has guided the music industry from its origin, and in the same way that wealth has never accumulated without white supremacy, music has never been consumed without racial bias.

Outside of hijacking hits, there are many examples of charts playing into systemic racism reflective of Racial Capitalism in the music industry. For example, The first Beatles record *Please Please Me* contains six different covers of R&B tracks, all originally from black artists. The purpose in including these covers was not to make an artistic statement, but instead to get chart action. Charts favored white artists, especially in the context of hijacking. Charts could inform white artists as to what R&B or black music was popular or trending, and then they would be able to cover these songs, be successful, and receive chart placement. This is yet another example of the self-perpetuating cycle, in which white artists look to the charts, behave accordingly, and are then rewarded and reaffirmed by the chart placement henceforth beginning the cycle again. In this way, charts functioned to encourage and facilitate the harmful and ultimately racist tendencies.

We can also observe the manifestation of Racial Capitalism in the curatorial functions and self-perpetuating nature of the charts, and their interactions with the music industry at large. The cyclic relationship of charts with the industry becomes incredibly problematic in that charting continues to systematically disadvantage people of color. Institutional quotas already limit people of color getting airplay, and *Billboard* charts only function to exacerbate existing

inequality within the chart-industry feedback loop (Watson, 188). Artists of color are not reflected in the charts, perpetuating the exclusion of artists of color in the industry, henceforth resulting in more charts excluding artists of color and completing the loop. The curatorial processes in which *Billboard* charts function do not simply document cultural inequities, but actively perpetuates them.

By examining *Billboard* charts we see that systemic racism is prevalent in the music industry, but through the framework of Racial Capitalism we see it is ubiquitous. Through this study I assert that like in the case of Capitalism, racism does not simply ail the music industry, but it is instead an integral part of it. Much of this boils down to the music industry existing within a capitalist system, and if everything in the economy is race informed, obviously every internal sector will be as well. In this way, the music industry is a microcosm of the American economy at large, in that it is uniquely informed by racism at its core.

The music industry only serves as one limited example of the ways in which white supremacy and Racial Capitalism have manifested in the economic culture of the United States. Understanding the severity of this situation, and the ways in which racist ideologies are inherently ingrained in our institutions, should not be a deterrent in attempting to confront these issues. Instead, it should keep us adequately informed and allow us to react pragmatically and effectively. Understanding the feedback loops and cyclic nature of all these aforementioned institutions allows us to harness the relationships strategically, with the potential for subtle but informed altercations to something as limited as tabulation methodology to have profound repercussions for significant change on a broad scale.

The purpose of this work is in no way to provide a solution. I believe that the overly prescriptive nature of that sort of work is both problematic and unproductive, especially from my

positionality as a white male. All I hope to accomplish in this work is to provide insight to the deeply inequitable dynamics at play in the music industry today, and begin the discussion as to how real substantive change could be brought about, given an understanding that racism pervades all in the United States.

CHARTS: PERPETUATE RACISM, BUT ALSO PROVIDE POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE

While *Billboard* charts perpetuate racial injustice, they are also a potential instrument for change. Due to the relevance of these charts in industry feedback loops, the influence of charts cannot be understated. *Billboard* charts serve as one concentrated space that influences the entirety of the musical landscape. If *Billboard* charts were utilized as a catalyst for change, their influence would span across record labels, artists, and consumer bases on an extensive scale. Due to the self-perpetuating nature of charts with the industry, subtle changes in the charting practices could very well snowball into substantive change in industry functions.

However, the charts of today still reflect racist dynamics, as they have for the entirety of their existence. While charts may not be explicitly segregated like they were in the 1940s, the same divisions exist today. The terminology associated with black music has changed and evolved over time, from “Race Records” to “Hot Black Singles,” from “Rhythm & Blues” to “Soul,” and now we even see “Urban” categories. While white artists are often applauded for any sort of genre-bending efforts, black artists find themselves time and time again being confined within categories that claim to be musically-informed, but that are very evidently racially-informed. Genre divisions in charting inform genre divisions within other musical institutions like the academy awards. Take Tyler, The Creator’s 2020 Grammy win for example. His album IGOR was praised for its sonically expansive tracks, many of which differed greatly

from his past work in the world of Hip-Hop and Rap. Nonetheless, the category in which he won the grammy was for best “urban” album, which Tyler himself likened to being a “politically correct way of saying the n-word” (Owoseje).

There is no question that these same divisive and inequitable institutions are in place today, so what does it mean to rethink our charting in terms of racial equity? Like others, I would suggest that an attainable and feasible way to begin a shift to equity would be to begin to make subtle but meaningful changes to the tabulation methodologies used by *Billboard* magazine.

ALTERING TABULATION METHODOLOGY AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

Tabulation methodology needs to be altered to recognize the agency and separateness of genre from the mainstream. The subjective nature of current tabulation methodology displays *Billboard* attempting to perform a role that should function organically, by the activities of core fans on a song-by-song and artist-by-artist basis (Molanphy). This should be restructured to best reflect core genre audiences, just as genre charts successfully did before the age of digital music consumption. This means limiting data pools to the clientele that purchases music specifically within a given genre. We should utilize music intelligence technologies like google cloud’s dataflow (which accounts for services like spotify wrapped) to categorize listeners based on their listening preferences, and weight different users’ streams accordingly. This technology could supplant the old soundscan technologies that made the R&B charting of pre-2000s so successful.

Unfortunately, the prominence of streaming inherently brings with it a level of subjectivity in chart tabulation, but there are plenty of ways to go about mitigating the detrimental impacts of this. A vital step would be hiring more black, indiegneous, and people of color to inform the (unfortunately) subjective nature of genre classification in the age of streaming. *Billboard* should take initiative to promote a more nuanced recognition of different

genres/styles, and understand the cultural implications of their charts. Practices like these would create ripples in the music industry.

By adjusting tabulation methodologies as outlined, *Billboard* could adjust the conceptual focus of charts from artists to audiences. A critical analysis of charting in tandem with the industry and Racial Capitalism shows us that the importance of charting lies within the audiences that it claims to represent. While charts may consist of track titles and the musical artists behind them, they function in the industry to reflect the tastes and preferences of consumers to labels, producers, artists, etc. In this way, charts hold immense societal significance. While they may not claim to accurately reflect every genre niche within the American consumer base, this is how genre charts are interpreted by the industry, and is why they must be adjusted accordingly.

More equitable charts could mean more equitable granting of awards by the academy, and better representation of the musical communities so thoroughly disenfranchised by systemic racism. Adjusting tabulation methodologies accordingly could create more inclusive musical spaces, diversifying the narratives we have access to, and creating new opportunities for collaboration and experimentation. This could serve as a starting point in beginning to confront the repercussions of systemic racism in the United States. An understanding of the ways in which white supremacy pervades all aspects of the American experience is crucial in beginning this work, and Racial Capitalism provides a comprehensive framework for doing so. We never needed white artists to translate black art in order to make it palatable for white audiences. By educating ourselves on the ways black artists were and still are barred from mainstream audiences by systemic racism, we can begin to critique pervasive racial injustice beyond the music industry, in the American economy at large.

There is no doubting the strength and seemingly permanent nature of the institutions that guide music consumption in the United States, and on a broader level, the institutions that guide economic function. Many of these institutions constitute feedback loops just like we have seen in the example of the music industry. Just as the charting and the industry make up a loop, Racial Capitalism shows us that Capitalism and white supremacy constitute a similar loop and engage in the same self-perpetuating dynamics. Racialization and the economy are not separate entities, but are instead integral to each other's existence. As the economy develops and expands under Capitalism, racialization, and in part white supremacy, is upheld, strengthened, and reaffirmed. This facilitates economic activity, creating the idea that white supremacy is not just sustainable, but profitable.

In these ways, the racist feedback loops observed within the music industry are simply reflective of the macro-level feedback loop created between culture and systemic inequality. The music industry only serves as one limited example of the way that white supremacy and Racial Capitalism have manifested in the economic culture of the United States. Understanding the severity of this situation, and the ways in which racist ideologies are inherently ingrained in our institutions is not meant to be a deterrent for attempting to confront these issues. However, it can keep us adequately informed and allow us to react pragmatically and effectively. Understanding the feedback loops and cyclic nature of all these aforementioned institutions allows us to harness the relationships strategically, with the potential for subtle but informed altercations as something as limited as tabulation methodology to have profound repercussions for substantive change on a broader scale.

CONCLUSION

Through this study, we are able to observe the history and development of the American music industry and the ways in which racial inequity exists at the core of the institutions that make up the industry. This is a history saturated with the implications of cultural appropriation that resemble/constitute theft, on both intellectual and monetary levels. Racial Capitalism gives us a powerful and applicable framework with which to analyze and understand the economic implications of systemic racism, and how this manifests in the music industry. This allows us to take an objective approach to a topic that is typically wrapped up in the more complicated and nuanced subjective issues of artistic integrity and cultural appropriation.

While not the focus on this paper, these issues are equally as important and problematic as the economics of this phenomena. Black artists time and time again are restricted and rarely allotted the same degree of artistic freedom as white artists are. They are barred from histories of popular music in which they served central and formative roles, instead cast in the shadows of their white counterparts. There is no way to quantify the harm that these dynamics have resulted in. Taking the economic approach of Racial Capitalism simply gives us a more objective approach, but understandings of the deep societal and less tangible repercussions of systemic racism must also be understood in going about trying to bring about substantive change and transformative justice.

Looking at *Billboard* charts serves as a great way to look into these dynamics as they have developed and as they exist today in the music industry. *Billboard* charts are reflective of musical audiences, as they inform the industry and create a feedback loop. In this way, pervasive practices of theft and appropriation become exacerbated and self-perpetuating. Understanding these feedback loops and self-perpetuating nature allow us to better understand how the

institutions that uphold systemic racism function at large. This can inform us to act accordingly in a strategic manner, harnessing these skewed power dynamics and feedback to our advantage to bring about change and equity.

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