

## How black music became urban

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**By Deborah Gabriel**

Former dancehall deejay, sociologist and cultural historian Dr William Lez Henry recently gave a powerful lecture entitled: *How Black Music Became Urban* – the title of this week's feature.

In his lecture Dr Henry sought to expose how the origins and meaning of black music are being lost as the white-controlled music industry continues to cash in on its popularity with mainstream audiences. Dr Henry said: "It is a very serious issue for us to think about how black music became urban." This is not least because there is a fundamental difference between urban music and black music which are often taken to mean the same thing.

In 2005 singer Ty revealed his frustration at this confusion when he said: "I'm not really comfortable with the word urban. It's a word that's been manufactured in this country and America to describe black music. The word urban seems to cover such a broad range of black music that it's wrong." According to Dr Henry the origins of black music lie in a form of cultural expression and a means of articulating the struggle against oppression and racism.

It was pioneered by those: "who utilised music as an alternative space within which to voice their disapproval at a system that persecuted them ..." Over the years the dynamics of black music have been aptly demonstrated by the way in which: "From blues, jazz, rock n roll, R&B, to reggae, it's had to redefine itself after it's been co-opted by the mainstream in order to maintain its relevance to its black core fan-base."

Dr Henry charged that the reason for this constant battle for its creators, performers and audiences to retain possession is because: "There are people who let's just say are not black, who are controlling the definition of what black music is." By using the term urban to replace 'black music', the white music industry is able to replace black artists with white performers. As Kwaku, founder of the Black Music Congress has stated: "The industry also seems keener to promote a white artist performing black music than a black artist."

We have only to look at the MOBO awards to see that recognition for so-called *Music of Black Origin* is being accorded to white artists. In 2003 Justin Timberlake won best R & B artist and Christina Aguilera won the best video award. Following criticism that the awards were doing the opposite of their objective which was acknowledging black achievement in music; in 2005 the winners were dominated by black artists including Lemar for best album, John Legend for best R & B act and Sway for best hip hop act.

### **When and why did black music become urban?**

The term Rhythm and blues was a white creation introduced in the late 1940's by the American Billboard magazine for two main reasons. Firstly to replace 'race' music which was pioneered by 'Negroes' and secondly it was a marketing tool to sell black music to white consumers. From then on it became a term that was used to describe any form of

black music that was popular among black audiences.

Dr Henry claims that R & B as it later became known, gained mass appeal in the UK in the late 1950s to early 1960s when white groups such as The Rolling Stones, The Beatles and Manfred Mann: "Achieved fame and fortune by copying this style of black music." However, one of the most famous and popular songs, *Brown Sugar* by the Rolling Stones, actually makes light of how during the period of European chattel enslavement, white slave masters used to rape black women as these lyrics demonstrate:

"Scarred old slaver know he's doin' alright. Hear him whip the women just around midnight. Ah brown sugar how come you taste so good (a-ha) brown sugar, just like a young girl should. A-huh." The irony of these offensive lyrics is that the song was written by Mick Jagger for Marsha Hunt, who was his black girlfriend at the time. Dr Henry commented: "What kind of a love song is that?"

It was during this period that the term 'rhythm and blues' became unpopular among black artists who associated it with white rock stars. In a bid to reclaim the authenticity of their music, in the US 'rhythm and blues' became known as 'soul music' and 'Motown', after the record label. White music, by this time had become known as rock n roll led by artists such as Elvis Presley. Senior Music Lecturer at Westminster University and Founder of the Reggae Philharmonic Orchestra, Mykaell Riley, pointed out that the term rock n roll was again a creation conceived to market another form of black music to a white audience:

"A deejay called Alan Free took the term rock n roll from black music to market it to a white audience." Dr Henry elaborated this point by explaining that rock n roll existed before Elvis Presley and the performers were black. But the hard rocking sax-based R & B of 1948 to 1953 pre-dates the Elvis Presley era which did not occur until the mid 1950s. The first rock n roll record ever released was by a black artist called Roy Brown in 1947 with *Good Rocking Tonight* which was a parody of gospel, whereby instead of 'rocking the lord', 'rocking' had sexual connotations.

Dr Henry argues that rock n roll therefore did not come out of a vacuum because: "All of these things have a history and that history is rooted in black music." According to Mykaell Riley the term urban first crept into use in the UK around 1997, having crossed the Atlantic from the USA where the term applied only to blacks and Hispanics: "In the UK companies were fighting over domain names which contained the term urban because they understood it as a term which they could use to exploit black music."

Dr Henry recalled that in 2003 he used to read a free newspaper which he picked up in Deptford called *London Extra* with the sub-heading: *Black Londoners' First Free Newspaper*. But by September 2003 the sub-heading had changed to *Urban Londoners Free Newspaper*. 2003 also saw the launch of a new magazine called *Urban News*. He said that this is an example of what happens when people do not think they have the power to define their own reality – someone defines it for them:

"If you don't control your definition then people can define you as they wish but not only that, they can also use those definitions to their own advantage", which is what we have seen with the transition of black music to urban.

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