“I am not anti black music but …”: popular music, the NME , and race in late twentieth-century Britain

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ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT

"I Am Not Anti Black Music But …": Popular Music, the *NME*, and Race in Late Twentieth-Century Britain

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Abstract

Popular music culture has often featured in postwar British history as a site of tolerance and inclusivity, of multicultural exchange and anti-racist activism. This article, while not denying music's intersections with progressive causes, presents a different narrative. I use the pages of Britain's most prominent weekly music paper, the *New Musical Express* (*NME*), to demonstrate the important role that music has played in perpetuating wider processes of racialization in the late twentieth century. Surveying contestations over race in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, it highlights the ways in which popular music institutions such as the *NME* could function as sites of racial formation, reproducing the social power of whiteness even when providing space for what was often referred to as "black music." The article underlines the degree to which popular music could produce hegemonically white cultural spaces, despite the diversity of musical culture at large. In so doing, it indicates the significance of popular culture for understanding patterns of racialization into the latter years of the twentieth century and beyond.

In June 1986, Britain's leading weekly music paper, the *New Musical Express* (universally known as the *NME*), published one of the most politically charged front pages in its long history. It depicted a young Black woman, mouth covered by a white hand, underneath the headline "Why British Black Music Doesn't Stand a Chance."[1] Inside, the paper carried a lengthy article by Paolo Hewitt, a white soul music aficionado in his late twenties who had been writing for *NME* since the early 1980s. Provocatively titled "Slaves to the Rhythm," the article reflected on the factors that had led to this exclusion of Black British musicians. "I'd like to think this is so not because of racism, but because of ignorance of the diversity and brilliance of black music," Hewitt wrote. He nevertheless admitted that this was "a hard conclusion to reach." Ultimately, Hewitt insisted, "Britain is a multi-racial society and yet the music industry (pop press included) does not reflect this."[2]

Hewitt's indictment arrived at a time when the *NME* was increasing its previously limited coverage of Black British musicians, while also giving space to a new generation of Black American artists associated with the rapidly expanding hip-hop genre. His verdict on the complicity of the music press in the industry's wider lack of diversity was—even at the time—hard to dispute, particularly in the case of publications such as the *NME* and its

[1] You can hear some of the music referred to in this article on Spotify and YouTube.
"Why British Black Music Doesn't Stand a Chance," *NME*, 14 June 1986, 1.

[2] Paolo Hewitt, "Slaves to the Rhythm," *NME*, 14 June 1986, 49. It is unclear who was responsible for the rather problematic headline.

weekly rivals *Melody Maker* and *Sounds* that claimed to be generalist in focus. These titles had long focused primarily on guitar music performed chiefly by white musicians, reflecting the longer-term erasure of Black performers from the rock music canon.[3] Such tendencies only became more pronounced in the wake of the punk explosion of the 1970s. Punk's affiliation with reggae, and its role in the Rock Against Racism (RAR) movement, ensured that some Black artists gained consistent music press attention and that publications like the *NME* upheld an anti-racist position that had roots in the longer-term history of the music press.[4] This did not, however, consistently translate into broader in-depth coverage of what was referred to—in essentialist terms by teams of overwhelmingly white journalists—as "black music."[5] Many of the genres generally referred to under this broad rubric, ranging from funk and soul to blues and jazz, had sizable audiences. Despite this, they were often reliant on specialist publications—*Blues & Soul, Echoes* (formerly *Black Echoes*), and the bluntly named *Black Music* (subsumed into *Blues & Soul* in 1984)—for detailed coverage. The mid-1980s expansion of the *NME* (and, less dramatically, its fellow weeklies) onto the turf of these titles was partly motivated by commercial concerns in a busy marketplace where newer non-weekly titles like *The Face* and (particularly) *Smash Hits* had become major rivals. More importantly, however, the *NME*'s short-lived move toward foregrounding the work of Black musicians starting in the mid-1980s—and its subsequent retreat from this in the early 1990s—reflected the ongoing centrality of race-making in British popular music culture, even as society was ostensibly becoming more multicultural.[6]

Tracking the role of race in the *NME* in this period allows for a new interpretation of the ways in which race functioned in late twentieth-century British popular music culture. This provides a counter-narrative to much of the existing multidisciplinary literature in this area, which has tended to present popular music in a broadly positive light, providing powerful platforms for resistance and conviviality in the face of widespread exclusion. Several analyses (mostly from cultural studies and sociology) have demonstrated music's significant role in processes of identity formation, within and across Black British and British Asian communities, as well as its function in disrupting racial formations through patterns of cross-cultural exchange.[7] Scholars, including Sean Campbell, Irene Morra, and Nabeel Zuberi, have also made important attempts to disentangle the many loose threads connecting popular music, race (particularly whiteness), and British (or, often, English) national

[3] For a useful introduction to this history of erasure, see Jack Hamilton, *Just Around Midnight: Rock and Roll and the Racial Imagination* (Harvard, 2016).

[4] For a useful (if occasionally somewhat generous) introduction, see Patrick Glen, "Sometimes Good Guys Don't Wear White: Morality in the Music Press, 1967–1983" (PhD diss., University of Sheffield, 2012), 164–88.

[5] "Black" is capitalized throughout this article apart from when referring to this music press tendency or when quoting.

[6] Histories of British multiculturalism include Kieran Connell, *Multicultural Britain: A People's History* (Hurst & Company, 2024); Gavin Schaffer, *The Vision of a Nation: Making Multiculturalism on British Television* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). On the "multicultural" versus "multiculturalism," see Stuart Hall, "The Multicultural Question," in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, ed. Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Duke, 2021), 409–34.

[7] On Black British and British Asian identity formation through music, see, for example, Falu Bakrania, *Bhangra and Asian Underground: South Asian Music and the Politics of Belonging in Britain* (Duke, 2013); William "Lez" Henry, "Reggae, Rasta, and the Role of the Deejay in the Black British Experience," *Contemporary British History* 26, no. 3 (2012): 355–73; Rehan Hyder, *Brimful of Asia: Navigating Ethnicity on the UK Music Scene* (Routledge, 2004); Jason McGraw, "Sonic Settlements: Jamaican Music, Dancing, and Black Migrant Communities in Postwar Britain," *Journal of Social History* 52, no. 2 (2018): 353–82; Lisa Amanda Palmer, "'LADIES A YOUR TIME NOW!' Erotic Politics, Lovers Rock, and Resistance in the UK African and Black Diaspora," *African and Black Diaspora* 4, no. 2 (2011): 177–92; Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi, eds., *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945* (Ashgate, 2017). Much of this work builds on Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (Routledge, 2002), 200–302. On conviviality and cultural exchange, see canonical works such as Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture* (Routledge, 2004); Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (Routledge, 1978). A useful application is Casper Melville, *It's a London Thing: How Rare Groove, Acid House, and Jungle Reshaped the City* (Manchester, 2019).

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identity.[8] As Lucy Robinson observes, historians have focused more on popular music's intersections with left-wing, anti-racist activism, particularly RAR—an example that is now de rigueur in synoptic histories of twentieth-century Britain.[9] Historical work on racism in popular music, meanwhile, has been limited by an over-emphasis on punk and its (relatively minor) intersections with the overt political racism of the far right, thus failing to offer sustained critical interrogation of the role of whiteness.[10]

This existing scholarship has, then, made important interventions. At the same time, however, it has led popular music culture to be historicized as a rare zone of tolerance and inclusion within British society rather than as a space of racialized contestations. The ability of performers of color to craft expressions of identity through music did not cancel out race's formative power in British popular music culture, and the successes of RAR certainly did not make this sphere uniformly anti-racist. In fact, popular music remained structured along the lines of race, and indeed reproduced racialized hierarchies, well into the last decade of the twentieth century. Responding to cultural theorist and sometime music critic Paul Gilroy's call to historicize the racial dynamics of the music press, not least by assessing the role of white music journalists in representing "black music,"[11] my analysis foregrounds the role of whiteness as "a normative structure, a discourse of power, and a form of identity" that remained a major organizing force in popular music just as it did in political and cultural life more broadly.[12] In the pages of the *NME* whiteness was codified as normative and authentic and yet often rendered invisible, especially next to the overbearing emphasis regularly placed on the Blackness of particular artists and styles.

The reproduction of a hegemonic whiteness was thus a fundamental (if not always conscious) function of the *NME*,[13] suggesting that popular music not only offered ways of challenging prejudice but also performed a significant role in reasserting racialized difference. This reinforces the continuing importance of late twentieth-century popular culture to histories of race in modern Britain. Race has belatedly become established as a core theme of postwar British history, with scholars adeptly crafting social, political, and cultural histories of activism and identity that have challenged long-established narratives

[8] Sean Campbell, *Irish Blood, English Heart: Second Generation Irish Musicians in England* (Cork, 2011); Irene Morra, *Britishness, Popular Music, and National Identity: The Making of Modern Britain* (Routledge, 2013); Nabeel Zuberi, *Sounds English: Transnational Popular Music* (Illinois, 2001).

[9] Lucy Robinson, *Now That's What I Call a History of the 1980s: Pop Culture and Politics in the Decade That Shaped Modern Britain* (Manchester, 2023), 124–25. The classic analysis of the movement is Gilroy, *Ain't No Black*, 146–77. The major monographs are Ian Goodyer, *Crisis Music: The Cultural Politics of Rock Against Racism* (Manchester, 2009); David Renton, *Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League, 1976–1982* (Routledge, 2019). For an oral history, see Daniel Rachel, *Walls Come Tumbling Down: The Music and Politics of Rock Against Racism, 2 Tone, and Red Wedge* (Picador, 2016). Indicative references to RAR in synoptic histories include David Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth-Century History* (Allen Lane, 2018), 423; Charlotte Lydia Riley, *Imperial Island: A History of Empire in Modern Britain* (The Bodley Head, 2023), 176–78; Pat Thane, *Divided Kingdom: A History of Britain, 1900 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2018), 340–42.

[10] See, for example, Roger Sabin, "'I Won't Let That Dago By': Rethinking Punk and Racism," in *Punk Rock: So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk*, ed. Roger Sabin (Routledge, 1999), 199–218; Matthew Worley and Nigel Copsey, "White Youth: The Far Right, Punk, and British Youth Culture, 1977–87," in *Tomorrow Belongs to Us: The British Far Right Since 1967*, ed. Matthew Worley and Nigel Copsey (Routledge, 2018), 113–31.

[11] Paul Gilroy, "Bohemians, Stamp Collectors, Revolutionaries, and Critics," in *A Hidden Landscape Once a Week: The Unruly Curiosity of the UK Music Press in the 1960s–80s … In the Words of Those Who Were There*, ed. Mark Sinker (Strange Attractor Press, 2018), 356–57.

[12] Vron Ware and Les Back, *Out of Whiteness: Color, Politics, and Culture* (Chicago, 2002), 13–14. The most obvious comparison here might be television. See, for example, Christine Grandy, "'The Show is Not About Race': Custom, Screen Culture, and the Black and White Minstrel Show," *Journal of British Studies* 59, no. 4 (2020): 857–84; Schaffer, *Vision of a Nation*; Rob Waters, "Black Power on the Telly: America, Television, and Race in 1960s and 1970s Britain," *Journal of British Studies* 54, no. 4 (2015): 947–70.

[13] See also the argument on visual culture made in Richard Dyer, *White* (Routledge, 1997).

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and historiographical absences.[14] A recent call to look beyond histories of activism and the racialized, to recognize the power of whiteness "as a social dynamic," to rethink canonical metanarratives, and thus to be attentive to both the forces constructing race and to the "practices, relations, and institutions" through which these forces operate, has nevertheless paid scant attention to the role of popular culture in these processes of racial formation.[15] The music press was, however, a key site in which race (and not least a largely unmarked whiteness) was constantly being renegotiated and reconstituted.

The *NME* acts as an ideal archival repository for addressing these processes and their broader significance. During the 1980s and early 1990s, the *NME* consistently remained the most prominent of a range of titles purporting to cover popular music in all its breadth while also engaging regularly with political and social issues. It sits at the heart of an enormous and underused source base that, as Patrick Glen has demonstrated, provides invaluable access to perspectives (rooted in youth culture and informal political spheres) that are frequently absent from traditional archives.[16] The 1970s may have been the heyday of the *NME* and its fellow weekly titles, but the paper still boasted a circulation of over 100,000 into the early 1990s.[17] Crucially, readership was higher than sales alone suggested. The National Readership Survey (NRS) consistently estimated that every copy of the paper sold in Britain was read by at least six people throughout the 1980s and 1990s.[18] The *NME* thus remained one of the country's most read weekly publications and continued to perform a key role in directing and reflecting cultural trends. It also acted as a kind of cultural institution in which various race-making forces coalesced and interacted through popular music.

The *NME* was primarily written and edited by white men. In this regard it resembled its readership. Data on readership ethnicity are lacking, but the NRS estimated that as much as three-quarters of the paper's audience was composed of young men under the age of thirty-five.[19] A study of the *NME* thus sheds light on how this limited—but undeniably influential—demographic constructed and debated ideas of race. Yet its overflowing weekly letters page also provided a platform for musicians, critics, and readers who were rooted in different ethnic communities to challenge these dominant perspectives. Although the letters selected for publication in *NME*, chosen by a different writer each week, can only ever give a partial sense of reader views, they were an important part of the paper's own distinctive "politics of signification." They highlight the conflicting readings of music-centered discourses and texts that ran throughout its reportage, in turn exposing divergent interpretations of race and difference within its content and among its audience.[20] Letters thus

[14] Examples from the last decade include Eddie Chambers, *Roots and Culture: Cultural Politics in the Making of Black Britain* (I. B. Tauris, 2017); Kieran Connell, *Black Handsworth: Race in 1980s Britain* (California, 2019); Kennetta Hammond Perry, *London is the Place for Me: Black Britons, Citizenship, and the Politics of Race* (Oxford, 2015); Natalie Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity, and the Women's Movement in England, 1968–1993* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Rob Waters, *Thinking Black: Britain, 1964–1985* (California, 2018).

[15] Marc Matera et al., "Introduction: Marking Race in Twentieth Century British History," *Twentieth Century British History* 34, no. 3 (2023): 407–14, at 411–12; Marc Matera et al., "Marking Race: Empire, Social Democracy, Deindustrialization," *Twentieth Century British History* 34, no. 3 (2023): 552–79, at 533.

[16] Patrick Glen, *Youth and Permissive Social Change in Britain's Music Papers, 1967–1983* (Springer, 2019). Race features in this book but figures more heavily in the earlier thesis version: Glen, "Sometimes Good Guys Don't Wear White." For a popular history, see Paul Gorman, *Totally Wired: The Rise and Fall of the Music Press* (Thames and Hudson, 2023).

[17] Information for 1992 is from *Circulation Review* 122 (1992), 8.

[18] See, for example, *National Readership Survey* 2 (1988), Table 3. The volume number refers to the second volume (of three) for the year in question.

[19] In 1988, for, instance over 75 percent of readers were men and over 80 percent were under thirty-five, while 65 percent were from the C1 and C2 social grades: *National Readership Survey* 2 (1988), Table 127.

[20] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (Routledge, 1980), 117–27. The encoding/decoding model is also used in Glen, *Youth and Permissive*

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help to generate a more critical understanding of the *NME*'s politics of racial formation, demonstrating the ways in which the dominant white male perspective of the paper could be both reinforced and challenged by readers. Of course, letters also give some degree of access to an otherwise "absent audience," without facing the nostalgia that often pervades musical oral histories.[21] This allows the *NME* to act as an archive that provides access to fans as well as musicians and critics, all claiming and shaping their identities via music during an ongoing era of "popular individualism."[22]

Blackness, Britishness, and "Black Music" in the mid-1980s *NME*

Reflecting on his early months as inaugural editor of *Black Music* in 1973, white future *NME* editor Alan Lewis remembered just one moment of significant awkwardness. In an effort to drum up publicity, he found himself being interviewed on the BBC World Service by Black British activist and writer Darcus Howe, who began editing the influential *Race Today* that same year. "[He] gave me quite a hard time," Lewis remembered, "Basically because I wasn't black, and what did I think I was doing editing a magazine called *Black Music*. I found it not easy to answer. He said, 'You're a cultural imperialist'—and I could see what he was driving at."[23] Such a state of affairs was hardly new. In Britain as elsewhere, imperially rooted ideas of expertise meant that white analysts had long been presented as the most appropriate interpreters of Black musicianship.[24] *Black Music* stemmed from Lewis's genuine desire to increase the representation of Black artists, but its very existence pointed not only to patterns of segregation in Britain's music press but also to the curatorial power of white critics who simultaneously endorsed and othered "black music."[25] Segregation and othering in the music press also reflected patterns of institutional racism. Neil Spencer, *NME* editor between 1978 and 1985, recalled "[getting] in a lot of trouble for putting black people on the cover" of the paper. Apparently, staff and publishers expressed their opposition by declaring, "There's too much ink on the cover this week."[26]

The *NME*'s increased emphasis on Black artists in the mid-1980s can be read as a direct rebuttal to this racism. As critic Lucy O'Brien emphasized in one 1987 edition of the weekly letters page, the increased space assigned to "black music" came both from "genuine love" and from a desire to counteract the ways "it has been ignored or trivialized by the white rock-oriented music press." Underlining the complexity of the racial dynamics in play, this explanation was offered in response to a Black reader, writing to accuse the paper of being

Social Change. For an introduction to Hall's thinking on race, see Stuart Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Harvard, 2017).

[21] Christine Grandy, "Cultural History's Absent Audience," *Cultural and Social History* 16, no. 5 (2019): 643–63; Martin Johnes, "Consuming Popular Music: Individualism, Politics, and Progressive Rock," *Cultural and Social History* 15, no. 1 (2018): 115–34.

[22] Emily Robinson et al., "Telling Stories About Post-War Britain: Popular Individualism and the "Crisis" of the 1970s," *Twentieth Century British History* 28, no. 2 (2017): 268–304. On music in this context, see Johnes, "Consuming Popular Music"; Ben Jones, "Football Causals, Fanzines, and Acid House: Working Class Subcultures, Popular Individualism, and Emotional Communities in 1980s and 1990s England," *Twentieth Century British History* 34, no. 23 (2023): 299–323; Matthew Worley, "Past! Future! In Extreme! Looking for Meaning in the New Romantics," *Journal of British Studies* 63, no. 3 (2024): 542–67.

[23] Alan Lewis, quoted in Mark Sinker, "The Use of the Word Black Had Become Very Powerful," in *A Hidden Landscape*, ed. Sinker, 171.

[24] On popular music criticism and empire, see Benjamin Bland, "'Imperial Musicology' at the End of Empire: Jazz, Race, and Musical Criticism in Mid-Twentieth Century Britain," *Atlantic Studies* (forthcoming).

[25] Lewis, quoted in Sinker, "The Use of the Word," 165.

[26] Neil Spencer, quoted in Rachel, *Walls Come Tumbling Down*, 48. Reference to this allegation is also made in Glen, "Sometimes Good Guys Don't Wear White," 177.

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patronizing in its dramatic shift toward covering Black artists.[27] Yet it would be remiss to ignore the wider political context provided by increasingly vocal calls for Black British representation and a broader politics of discontent and socioeconomic upheaval.[28] The sense of decline across urban England and the riots of 1981 were narrated in the music press largely through the lens of race. Homegrown reggae acts like Aswad and Steel Pulse—along with multiracial "2-Tone" ska groups like The Specials, The Selecter, and The Beat—played crucial roles. These association of these artists with working-class urban environments in London and the West Midlands, alongside their oppositional politics, was emphasized prominently in coverage by the *NME* and other weeklies.[29] Interest in less overtly political Black British musicians was, however, limited. "Silly Games," Janet Kay's major 1979 hit, did not prompt sustained interest in the emergent "lovers rock" subgenre, for example.[30]

The *NME*'s expanded coverage for Black British artists in the mid-1980s did, however, emerge from musical (as much as political) developments. A new generation of British artists were showing the influence of "black music" genres that the British music press had tended to associate more strongly with the United States: funk, soul, and R&B. These artists, often making prominent use of keyboard and synthesizers alongside guitars, prompted critics and musicians to identify an increased "blackness" in British popular music. It was actually white acts that were often the focus of such commentary. "It was never very revolutionary but there were very few white acts trying to play black music in an interesting way. Whereas now everybody wants black-sounding players in the group," observed Heaven 17's Martyn Ware in a 1984 *NME* interview.[31] Some white bands effectively passed as Black to unsuspecting listeners. The debut single from pop-soul group Living in a Box impressed the legendary Black American singer Bobby Womack so much in 1987 that he set about a cover version, all the while under the erroneous impression that the band were Black. This chain of events earned the group a mild interrogation in the *NME*.[32] For some music press observers, the appropriation of "black music" sounds by white acts amounted to an attempt to exploit commercial trends. Kris Needs, editor of the monthly *ZigZag*, attacked "bank-clerk copyists desperately grabbing black music udders."[33] One white *NME* reader and jobbing musician, meanwhile, highlighted a noticeable industry preference for "black sounding singers," telling the paper that they had frequently responded to trade ads for such performers that "Without exception" sought white vocalists who met this description.[34]

All these perspectives rested on a conviction that music could communicate race: that its "blackness" could be heard, imitated, and commercialized. In the process, of course, they

[27] Lucy O'Brien and J. N. Woodman, in "Tool," *NME*, 14 March 1987, 54.

[28] See, for instance, Chambers, *Roots and Culture*; Connell, *Black Handsworth*; Simon Peplow, *Race and Riots in Thatcher's Britain* (Manchester, 2019); Waters, *Thinking Black*.

[29] Useful examples of 2-Tone coverage (all with associated front covers) include Adrian Thrills, "Two-Tones Over Teuton," *NME*, 25 August 1979, 30–31; Adrian Thrills, "20 Flight Punk 21 Gun Reggae," *NME*, 8 March 1980, 6–7, 61; Paolo Hewitt, "1981 … Year of the Selecter," *Melody Maker*, 15 November 1980, 31; Paul Du Noyer, "The Specials: Giving Up the Ghost?," *NME*, 8 August 1981, 18–19. Indicative examples of Black British reggae coverage in this period include Roy Carr, "Black Pride Don't Mean Black Racism … Meet the Handsworth Klan," *NME*, 10 June 1978, 23; Vivien Goldman, "Reggaematic Survival," *Melody Maker*, 11 November 1978, 17–18; Mark Ellen, "The Handsworth Revolution … Meets the Berlin Wall," *NME*, 30 June 1979, 7–8, 54.

[30] Kay's single received a dismissive four-line review in the *NME* upon its release: Charles Shaar Murray, "Singles," *NME*, 2 June 1979, 24. For an introduction to the politics of lovers rock, see Palmer, "'LADIES A YOUR TIME NOW!'."

[31] Martyn Ware, quoted in Richard Cook, "Three Steps to Heaven," *NME*, 18 August 1984, 6.

[32] Paolo Hewitt, "Boxing Clever," *NME*, 2 May 1987, 14.

[33] Kris Needs, "Ol' Goo Eyes is Back," *ZigZag*, November 1984, 14.

[34] Terry Chambers, in "Beastie Bag," *NME*, 28 June 1986, 50.

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also constructed whiteness as normative: the whiteness of an artist only needed to be spoken if—like Living in a Box—they convincingly approximated "black music" for the listener. This partly implicit politics of race was further complicated by issues of national identity. For the *NME*'s Paolo Hewitt, writing in an early 1986 soul music history feature, the problem was that "no *British* soul sound" had yet "really come into being." He accused prominent white soulsters like Spandau Ballet and Paul Weller of leaning too far into impersonations of their Black American influences. It was "only young British black artists" who were doing "something a little less predictable."[35] Hewitt's emphasis here on the need for Britishness should not be surprising. It fed back into a long-term music press tradition of emphasizing the authenticity of artists, itself influential in shaping wider social attitudes toward popular music and its function within British society.[36] The *NME* predictably both inferred the inauthenticity of white British soul acts and cast Black British artists as the authentic solution to soundtracking a national soul music.

In keeping with this diagnosis, the mid-1980s *NME* provided a platform for Black British artists to express their perspectives on the relationship between national identity and their own variant of "black music." One prominent example was South London soul singer Junior Giscombe, who briefly threatened transatlantic stardom at the start of his career. In 1982, the *NME* had not only made him a rare Black British cover star but also dubbed him leader of a new "British Invasion" (a reference to the 1960s dominance of British acts across the Atlantic).[37] Giscombe credited his early success to the un-American qualities of his music, stressing that his breakthrough single "Mama Used to Say" was "not a typical American soul record" and was "just so English."[38] By 1985, it was clear Giscombe's success would be far more modest than some predictions had suggested, but his ambition remained. In an *NME* interview that year he asserted his wish to make music that truly reflected his Black British identity while also speaking to a mainstream audience: "I'm trying to build a sound from Britain which is a universal sound that will sell black music from Britain in a completely different way than it's ever been sold before."[39] His hopes reflected a common desire amongst many young Black Britons in this era to forge a *Black British* identity, one example of what Stuart Hall, in an influential 1988 essay, branded "new ethnicities."[40]

At the same time, Giscombe's emphasis on universality and on selling Black British music ran counter to the ways in which "black music" subcultures in Britain had positioned themselves against the commercialism of the mainstream music industry. Famously, in his classic 1987 analysis, Paul Gilroy stressed the anti-capitalist dimensions of music's role in Black British culture.[41] The desire of artists like Giscombe to "sell" Black British music in the mid-1980s might be read through the lens of neoliberalism and Black enterprise culture.[42] In the pages of the *NME*, however, we can also see that this desire was one of the only routes toward establishing Britishness in a music press and industry context that understood "black music" most of all as an American cultural form. Interviews with

[35] Paolo Hewitt, "Soul Patrol: The 80s Mix," *NME*, 25 January 1986, 15. Emphasis in original. Hewitt's June 1986 feature on the challenges facing Black British artists in the music industry was prompted by the response he received to this piece.

[36] The importance of authenticity to the British music press is a major theme in Glen, *Youth and Permissive Social Change*.

[37] "The Second British Invasion Starts Here: Stateside Success the Junior Giscombe Way," *NME*, 3 April 1982, 1.

[38] Junior Giscombe, quoted in Adrian Thrills, "Growing Up With Junior," *NME*, 3 April 1982, 26.

[39] Junior Giscombe, quoted in Paolo Hewitt, "Junior Showtime," *NME*, 23 February 1985, 17. For another example, see Courtney Pine's reflections on Black British jazz in Paolo Hewitt, "On the Trail of the Courtney Pine," *NME*, 18 August 1986, 30–31, 57.

[40] Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, ed. Gilroy and Gilmore, 246–56.

[41] Gilroy, *Ain't No Black*, 200–302.

[42] See Camilla Schofield et al., "'The Privatisation of the Struggle': Anti-Racism in the Age of Enterprise," in *The Neoliberal Age? Britain in the 1970s*, ed. Aled Davies et al. (UCL, 2021), 199–225.

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Black British artists in the paper frequently focused on the perceived need to escape this perception. Ironically, for some, this meant turning to the United States for industry support. Paul Johnson, another would-be Black British soul star of the time, told the *NME* that he had landed a record deal with American major label CBS by insisting to executives that he wanted his music "to have a British identity" to stand out from the crowd. It was this approach, he insisted, that would get Black British artists "the airplay" they needed to "make [a] point."[43] For others, the rationale was to demonstrate the viability of a Black British music culture vibrant enough to do without American influences. Few acts took this as literally as the unambiguously named multiracial funk group Black Britain. The group's core goal was baked into their name, with band leader Ron Elliston aiming "to create a new black-oriented music" so as to "encourage others away from the American mainstream."[44]

Attempts to emphasize individuality and Britishness by Black British artists were not always taken seriously in the music press, however. Enormously successful Anglo-Nigerian soul pop singer Sade Adu (frontwoman of an otherwise white male band bearing her first name) emphasized her Britishness, for example in relation to her accent when singing, yet was routinely dismissed by many critics. In one particularly uncomfortable 1984 *NME* interview, writer Richard Cook not only derided Sade's music but also openly mocked the singer's claims to be offering a fresh, individual sound. The interview was patronizingly headlined "Educating Sade," as if the singer needed to be corrected as to her true position.[45] A later cover feature for the paper was problematically framed around tabloid rumors regarding the singer's mental health. She critiqued the way papers like the *NME* presented her as an inauthentic pop star manufactured to conquer the American market, and complained about endless comparisons to Billie Holiday and the inference that her music soundtracked a vacuous (and implicitly white) yuppie culture of "wine bars and health clubs and boutiques."[46] Sade's treatment in the *NME* was undoubtedly shaped by gender as well as race, pointing to one of the more obvious limitations of the paper's interest in championing Black British musicians. Ultimately, despite achieving the kind of commercial success that peers like Giscombe had so openly targeted in their appearances in the paper, she paid a price for winning over what the *NME* saw (in her words) as "a naff audience."[47] This set the tone for music press coverage of many other commercially successful Black British artists in the years to come.[48]

The *NME*'s rejection of Sade underlines the degree to which the paper prioritized its own constructions of authentic Black British musical culture. At its most awkward, this led to determinist exercises in cramming together artists with divergent approaches and interests. A January 1987 "Soul Britannia" cover feature, for instance, brought together four bands with strikingly different sounds on the confusing basis that they were not part of a movement but were still united by "stretching soul apart" in service of "Britain's persistent fascination with black American music."[49] The Black artists interviewed for this piece were clearly reluctant to play along with this strange framing. Each acknowledged the influence of Black American musicians, but they were less accepting of being categorized by the paper as "soul" artists. Heather Small, singer of Hot House (later of M People), was dismissive. "I don't know what 'British Soul' is," she stated bluntly.[50] For Russell Christian of The

[43] Paul Johnson, quoted in Paolo Hewitt, "Revelation from Paradise," *NME*, 17 January 1987, 19.
[44] Paolo Hewitt, "Home Fire," *NME*, 22 March 1986, 13.
[45] Richard Cook, "Educating Sade," *NME*, 25 August 1984, 13.
[46] Alan Jackson, "Don't Look Down," *NME*, 3 May 1986, 10–11, 47.
[47] Sade, quoted in Jackson, "Don't Look Down," 10.
[48] Morra, *Britishness*, 133–34.
[49] "Soul Britannia!," *NME*, 31 January 1987, 1; "The New Soul Frontier," *NME*, 31 January 1987, 9.
[50] Heather Small, quoted in Stuart Cosgrove, "Born in Flames," *NME*, 31 January 1987, 11. Perhaps unsurprisingly Small's white bandmates were more receptive to the soul tag.

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Christians, the term was only being used because of race: "I don't know why we should be called soul just because we're black."[51] His assessment was, of course, spot on. No matter how many white acts performed soul, the term was still perceived to refer to part of a wider "black music" landscape, and its use was understood to convey a particular idea of race and difference.

No matter how well-meaning they may have been, attempts to use the *NME* as a platform for Black British musicians in the mid-1980s were stymied by long-established music press tendencies to categorize and define artists around genres that were, themselves, racialized. Troublingly for the cause of Black British music, this meant that attempts at definition often relied on applying Britishness to an overarching framework of Blackness that had largely been created by white critics. This was true even in articles that gave an overtly critical perspective on the challenges facing Black British musicians, like the damning Hewitt feature "Slaves to the Rhythm."[52] Such an approach not only framed coverage of Black British artists around an already problematic music press idiom but also skirted uncomfortably close to identifying Britishness with whiteness and "black music" as an American import. It is unsurprising, given this context, that many Black British acts in the 1980s had little interest in trying to conform to institutionalized music press constructions of genre or identity and, as a result, were left underrepresented.[53] Equally, it is not difficult to see how the *NME* was unsuccessful in challenging audience preconceptions of the links between race, genre, and identity. As one astute reader noted in a July 1986 letter to the paper, "the kind of person who reads the *NME*" was likely to subscribe to "concepts of alternativity and trendiness" that situated "music by black people" as part of an inauthentic commercial music landscape.[54] This conflict reappeared in the paper in the context of intense debates that focused on a radical new style emerging from Black America: hip-hop.

Race, Audience, and the *NME*'s "Hip-Hop Wars"

When hip-hop first caught the attention of the British music press it was widely dismissed as a novelty, a reaction to the prominence it afforded to the DJ (and their creation of new sounds from fragments of old records) and to the rapper (and their uncompromising embrace of the street lexicons of Black America). "DJ music," as one *Melody Maker* journalist branded it in the dying days of the 1970s, was destined for "the land of lost fads."[55] In May 1981, the *NME* broke ranks by devoting a cover feature to "rap." The write-up offered a bolder interpretation, insisting that this "form instigated by black teenagers in the South Bronx is becoming indispensable for blacks and whites."[56] Despite this optimism, it was not until the middle of the decade that sustained enthusiasm for hip-hop could be detected in the *NME* or its rivals. As late as 1985 critics who praised hip-hop records were having to rebut charges that the genre had been a flash in the pan. "Hip-hop is not dead," one February 1985 *NME* review protested.[57] By the end of that year, the genre's rise had become increasingly difficult to ignore, and the *NME* became embroiled in what its writers semi-jokingly referred to as the paper's "hip-hop wars."[58]

[51] Russell Christian, quoted in Lucy O'Brien, "The Inequality of Misery," *NME*, 31 January 1987, 10.

[52] Hewitt, "Slaves to the Rhythm," 25–27, 49.

[53] Some relevant examples feature in Robert Strachan, "Britfunk: Black Popular Music, Identity, and the Recording Industry in the Early 1980s," in *Black Popular Music*, ed. Stratton and Zuberi, 67–83.

[54] D. Piccioni, in "Beastie Bag," *NME*, 5 July 1986, 54.

[55] Davitt Sigerson, "Freak of the Week," *Melody Maker*, 15 December 1979, 9.

[56] Richard Grabel, "Rap Rap Rap," *NME*, 30 May 1981, 31.

[57] Simon Witter, "Run-DMC: 'DMC: DMX + HM = OTT!'," *NME*, 23 February 1985, 25.

[58] Pat Long, *The History of the NME: High Times and Low Times at the World's Most Famous Music Magazine* (Portico, 2012), 163–65.

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As such a moniker implies, tensions over hip-hop ran high. This was a time of relative sales decline for the paper, and editorial debates over the genre were thus partly motivated by commercial concerns. At the same time, however, they were clearly understood by writers as being at least partially about race. As Deputy Editor Stuart Cosgrove (a hip-hop advocate) put it in a 1986 retrospective feature, "Jokes were cracked, blood vessels burst, and charges of racism and counter-racism ricocheted around the office."[59] Of course, liking or disliking hip-hop was not intrinsically racist or anti-racist, but that this was even a semi-serious point of discussion among *NME* writers is revealing, demonstrating the degree to which they saw themselves as active agents in an explicitly racialized cultural sphere. Long-standing *NME* contributor Barney Hoskyns, summarizing the "hip-hop wars" as akin to a clash of cultures, recalled Cosgrove and Hewitt arguing that "the paper should cover anything that was black," while their opponents insisted "the *NME* was about the white underground and that the readers didn't want to know about Run-DMC."[60] These positions both reasserted race-making as a core function of the *NME*, with the latter explicitly reinscribing a normative whiteness at the heart of the paper's audience and purpose.

Ultimately, the conflict more or less boiled down to hip-hop versus "indie," a loosely defined rock subgenre rooted in independent record label culture. Hip-hop often stood in here for a wider conceptualization of "black music," including aforementioned styles like soul and new movements like house and techno, but it had particular qualities that made it comfortably the most obvious and most consistent target for critical *NME* writers and readers. It offered an alternative vision of authenticity, rooted in its own highly distinctive patterns of lyricism and sound manipulation.[61] Perhaps more importantly, however, it was revolutionary and was thus set to upturn the popular music landscape. "Hip-hop is the space ghost, the music that haunts rock, doing it, dismantling it and finally destroying it," declared a euphoric Cosgrove review of New York rapper LL Cool J's 1985 debut album.[62] When hip-hop acts incorporated rock sounds into their musical attack, this rhetoric became more explicitly racialized. Hewitt, for instance, argued that New York hip-hop label Def Jam Records had fundamentally "changed the *sound* of black music" through the mix of "rock, funk and rap" produced by its artists. Aside from the Beastie Boys (a Def Jam act), however, "White groups who attempt it end up sounding feeble and weak."[63] The gulf between the appeal of hip-hop and that of much rock music was undoubtedly overstated in these interpretations but, crucially, writers veered all too easily toward rendering genre differences in racial as much as in musical terms.

As these examples indicate, positive coverage of hip-hop in the *NME* presented the style as extraordinary in comparison to the paper's more traditional music of choice. The indie scene, by contrast, was constructed in terms of ordinariness. Indie bands promoted by the *NME* in the mid-1980s were regularly praised for their perceived realness and down-to-earth qualities. Such emphasis reflected wider tendencies in British society toward using ideas of ordinariness and authenticity as forms of knowing, platforms for critique, and bases for identity.[64] The ordinariness and ostensible independence of indie enabled musicians and critics to position it as genuine and representative of audiences, with other styles dismissed as consumerist and irrelevant. "All the hits nowadays," bemoaned David Keegan

[59] Stuart Cosgrove, "Taking the Rap," *NME*, 20–27 December 1986, 36.

[60] Barney Hoskyns, quoted in Long, *History of the NME*, 163.

[61] There is a sizable literature on hip-hop and authenticity. A useful introduction is Justin Williams, "Historicizing the Breakbeat: Hip-Hop's Origins and Authenticity," *Lied und populäre Kultur* 56 (2011): 133–67.

[62] Stuart Cosgrove, "Master Blaster of Jaw-Law," *NME*, 15 February 1986, 27.

[63] Paolo Hewitt, "Singles," *NME*, 7 December 1985, 24. Emphasis in original.

[64] Claire Langhamer, "'Who the Hell are Ordinary People?' Ordinariness as a Category of Historical Analysis," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 28 (2018): 175–95; Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, "Discourses of Class in 'New Times'," *Contemporary British History* 31, no. 2 (2017): 294–317.

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of Scottish indie group the Shop Assistants, "have a silly little synthesizer bit that *always* sounds the same, and it's bloody annoying. Supermarket music."[65] Keegan's group soon disappeared from view but not before they were branded by chief *NME* indie patron Danny Kelly as "*the best and most important independent group in Britain today*," despite their relatively unremarkable indie pop guitar sound.[66] The Smiths were perhaps the definitive "real" and "authentic" indie alternative.[67] Frontman Morrissey was at the forefront of this narrative, proclaiming (at the dawn of the band's career) that they stood out because "for the first time in too long a time, this is real music played by real people."[68] Fans often expressed similar sentiments. "These particular songs," wrote one admirer in a Smiths fanzine "touch so close to the realities of life, which many other artists are frightened to do."[69]

Indie's whiteness—all twenty-two of the acts on the *NME*'s scene-codifying *C86* compilation cassette were white—was predictably left unspoken and implicitly presented as normative.[70] This effect was brought into sharper relief by hip-hop coverage that dwelled on the style's most extreme elements. One particularly problematic cover story focused on "Yo Boys," a Black American youth subculture originating in West Baltimore, billed on the front page as "teenage ... they listen to nothing but rap ... they'll shoot you for the hell of it."[71] Inside, the story was relayed mostly without any socioeconomic context. It also bought (albeit with some skepticism) into the mythology behind Yo Boy-beloved rapper Schoolly D, then rumored to have gained his record deal by putting a gun to the head of a label boss.[72] Reporting of this kind risked rendering hip-hop all the more extraordinary and alien by comparison to indie (or British popular music more broadly), playing into stereotypes of lawless Blackness that were then still at the center of moral panics around "mugging" and urban crime in Britain.[73] Equally, it allowed critical readers to argue that hip-hop's Blackness prevented it from receiving due reproach. Some accused the paper of romanticizing the Yo Boys and giving them the "soft sell."[74] One correspondent speculated whether writers were "worried that it's uncool to criticise anything emerging from black America?"[75] Similar critiques were later made of reports on other hip-hop groups. A May 1987 interview with militantly Black nationalist group Public Enemy, conducted by young Anglo-Nigerian writer Dele Fadele (a rare Black British *NME* contributor), was attacked for supposedly letting the band's "racist bullshit"—alongside their homophobia and misogyny—pass "unchallenged."[76] Public Enemy coverage consistently met with attacks of this nature.[77]

NME readers were not necessarily alone in calling for stronger critiques of hip-hop's controversial dimensions. Some other sections of the music press adopted a similar attitude. In

[65] David Keegan, quoted in Danny Kelly, "Let's Loot the Supermarket!," *NME*, 29 March 1986, 22.

[66] Kelly, "Let's Loot," 22. Emphasis in original.

[67] Zuberi, *Sounds English*, 27–31.

[68] Morrissey, quoted in Allan Jones, "The Blue Romantics," *Melody Maker*, 3 March 1984, 25.

[69] Julie Grant, "This Charming Band," *A New England* 7 (1986), 10.

[70] *C86* (NME / Rough Trade, 1986). The whiteness of indie is discussed, albeit rather unsatisfyingly, in Matthew Bannister, *White Boys, White Noise: Masculinities and 1980s Indie Rock* (Farnham, 2006).

[71] "The Yo Boys," *NME*, 13 September 1986, 1.

[72] Paolo Hewitt, "Boys Keep Killing," *NME*, 13 September 1986, 20, 50; Jay Strongman, "Schoolly's Out," *NME*, 13 September 1986, 21–23.

[73] The classic analysis is Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (Macmillan, 1978).

[74] Les Raphael, Marianne Harris and David Simpson, in "Bunk Bag," *NME*, 27 September 1986, 66.

[75] Steve B, in "Bunk Bag," *NME*, 27 September 1986.

[76] Anthony Selby, in "Angst," *NME*, 18 July 1987, 50. For the article being critiqued, see Dele Fadele, "The Enemy Without," *NME*, 16 May 1987, 18–19. For Fadele's response, see Dele Fadele, in "Angst," *NME*, 25 July 1987, 50.

[77] See, for example, letters in "Angst," *NME*, 6 February 1988, 46; "Angst," *NME*, 12 March 1988, 50; "Angst," *NME*, 14 May 1988; "Angst," *NME*, 4 June 1988, 54; "Angst," *NME*, 11 June 1988, 50; "Angst," *NME*, 25 June 1988, 62.

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a scathing 1985 review of New York rapper Kurtis Blow, for example, *Melody Maker*'s Simon Reynolds lambasted the tendency for white fans in Britain to give problematic hip-hop gender politics a free pass: "Black subculture tends to get uncritical approval from white middle class boys, who go on and on about dignity and pride. Forgetting that more often than not this is black *male* pride, and the victims of its assertion are usually women."[78] In mid-1986, Reynolds (who also wrote positively about numerous hip-hop acts) wrote a longer essay critiquing "guilt-ridden white liberals" for insisting on seeing hip-hop in "proto-socialist, or at least humanist" terms.[79] *Melody Maker* also showed a willingness to undercut hip-hop's presentation of itself. Bronx rapper Just Ice, for example, was introduced at the start of an interview as "hip-hop's numero uno misogynist guy."[80] A cover feature on Schoolly D, meanwhile, took a dry jab at the *NME* (as well as its subject) by sardonically observing that "If Schoolly is the 'rising star of the Yo Boy scene' as the NME would have it, then he's hip hop's first yuppie Yo Boy."[81]

Unlike the *NME, Melody Maker* refused to allow its letters page to host sustained conflicts over hip-hop coverage. By contrast the *NME* writers who took it in turns to edit the letters page seemed determined to give a platform to broader anti-hip-hop attitudes within its readership. Many published letters presented hip-hop as being at the forefront of a "black music" incursion upon the implicitly white music culture the *NME* otherwise focused on. Combatants on both sides of the "hip-hop wars" would have had their reasons for including such letters, whether to fight back against the arguments they contained or to promote views by proxy. However, the frequency with which anti-hip-hop views appeared—and the rarity of Black voices—also amounted to a tacit editorial acceptance that the paper remained a fundamentally white (and predominantly male) publication with readers who were entitled to feel threatened by the Black masculinity at the forefront of hip-hop. White readers thus used the letters page to defend their claims to what they understood as a hegemonically white male space, a process that mirrored similar patterns in local and national newspapers up and down the country.[82] This process also resembled similarly gendered and racialized contestations over access to physical spaces, something that Camilla Schofield has recently identified as a significant part of the social history of race in postwar Britain.[83]

Some letter writers went to significant effort to present their anti-hip-hop views as reasonable rather than prejudicial. "Of course it is right to present a complete range of all music," one reader observed, "but the large number of rap and funk bands must be driving even the most loyal reader to despair." This correspondent insisted they were "not anti black music," but also branded the paper too "keen" to cover Black artists, the result being "that horrors like Roxanne and Howie T and Run-DMC [all hip-hop artists] get 'Single of the Week.'"[84] In other words, this reader felt that hip-hop acts were not only being promoted to a disproportionate degree but were being promoted *because* of their Blackness. This was a common accusation in anti-hip-hop letters. One American reader accused *NME* of covering hip-hop merely as a way of "showing off" the publication's "anti-racist intentions."[85] Others cast doubt on the authenticity of both hip-hop artists and the critics giving them space in

[78] Simon Reynolds, "Blowing Out," *Melody Maker*, 11 January 1986, 29. Emphasis in original.

[79] Simon Reynolds, "Nasty Boys," *Melody Maker*, 19 July 1986, 26.

[80] Frank Owen, "Sleeping Around," *Melody Maker*, 20 September 1986, 45.

[81] Frank Owen, "Triumph of the Ill," *Melody Maker*, 15 November 1986, 24.

[82] See, for example, Benjamin Bland, "'Publish and Be Damned?' Race, Crisis, and the Press in England During the Long Hot Summer of 1976," *Immigrants and Minorities* 37, no. 3 (2019): 163–83; Rachel Yemm, "Immigration, Race, and Local Media: Smethwick and the 1964 General Election," *Contemporary British History* 32, no. 1 (2019): 98–122.

[83] Camilla Schofield, "In Defence of White Freedom: Working Men's Clubs and the Politics of Sociability in Late Industrial England," *Twentieth Century British History* 34, no. 3 (2023): 515–51.

[84] Will Marks, in "Bunk Bag," *NME*, 27 September 1986, 66.

[85] Julie Ann Rizzo, in "Angst," *NME*, 20 June 1987, 54.

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the paper. One reader, pointing to the contrast between hip-hop's problematic elements and its apparent embrace of consumerism, branded it an inauthentic "style cult."[86] Another accused pro-hip-hop writers of being motivated by careerism: "Paolo [Hewitt] has seen the future of music—it is (for better or worse) black and beat-box based, and Paolo has to bear his job prospects in mind."[87] Sometimes letters veered into overt racism that mirrored aspects of far right rhetoric by positioning whiteness as threatened by invasion and/or replacement.[88] On one occasion, for instance, some of the paper's most vocal hip-hop advocates were branded as "minority fetishists" who had "submerge[d] whatever independent identity this paper once had" in the name of "black music."[89]

Perhaps more shocking than the racism on display in some anti-hip-hop letters is the fact that, soon enough, these hostile voices won out. Real or imagined commercial concerns were partly to blame. Hewitt recalled the spread of "disinformation," namely that "if you put a black person on the cover of the *NME*, sales went down." Lucy O'Brien cast the entire period as "a fight for the identity of the *NME*" in which publishers ultimately sided with the most vitriolic sections of the paper's readership.[90] Cosgrove was sacked as deputy editor in early 1987 and by the late summer of that year, a noticeable shift was already apparent. The paper found itself rebuked by one reader for "revert[ing] back to being a predominantly white, rockist and bland student rag" with only the odd "token black music feature." The editorial team had, this reader lamented, "played it safe, taken no risks, and kept [a] prejudiced readership happy."[91] Two months later another reader felt moved to ask, "What's up with the NME?" Bemoaning the decline in hip-hop coverage—"whether you like it or not, the most original thing happening in music right now"—this letter writer admitted to being "baffled" as to the change in approach.[92] Gavin Martin, editing the letters page that week, replied with a simple "You're not the only one, chum," indicating ongoing staff divisions around these issues.[93]

The *NME* did not abandon hip-hop entirely. In October 1988, it even baited a portion of its audience by placing Public Enemy on the cover alongside a headline asking if they were "The greatest rock 'n' roll band in the world?!"[94] Nevertheless hip-hop's wider prominence in the paper declined dramatically. With it, the more general turn toward prominent coverage of Black artists, not least of Black British music, also decreased significantly. Almost a third of *NME* covers in 1986 and 1987 had featured Black artists in some capacity. This figure contracted so much over subsequent years that, by 1991, there was only one Black cover star in the entire year, while multiple white artists appeared on the cover two or even three times.[95] Long-standing practices of allowing reader debate in the pages of the *NME* thus aligned with conflicts among writers to enable a reassertion of hegemonic whiteness within the *NME*. This left the path clear for indie to take a position of dominance in the paper's musical coverage, but not entirely without incident. As the 1990s dawned, one

[86] Simon Watney, in "Angst," 11 June 1988.

[87] Marc Harley, in "Flag Bag," *NME*, 10 January 1987, 46.

[88] Anna Marie Smith, *New Right Discourses on Race and Sexuality* (Cambridge, 1994) remains a useful overview of the production of such rhetorics in Britain, especially Chapter 4 on Powellism.

[89] Mike Connor, in "Tool," *NME*, 28 March 1987, 50. This letter earned a stinging rebuke from the editor of that week's letters page: Steven Wells, in "Tool," 28 March 1987.

[90] Paolo Hewitt and Lucy O'Brien, quoted in Paul Gorman, *In Their Own Write: Adventures in the Music Press* (Sanctuary, 2001), 310–11.

[91] John Gall, in "Angst," *NME*, 8 August 1987, 42.

[92] Sam Lyall, in "Angst," *NME*, 10 October 1987, 66.

[93] Gavin Martin, in "Angst," 10 October 1987.

[94] "The Greatest Rock 'n' Roll Band in the World?!," *NME*, 8 October 1988, 1.

[95] The sole Black cover star in 1991 was rapper Ice-T: "Trigger With Attitude: The Shooting Stardom of Ice-T," *NME*, 13 July 1991, 1.

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of the scene's leading lights would further expose the complexities of the *NME*'s politics of whiteness.

Morrissey, Race, and Nation

"HIP HOP IS A NOISY, REPETIVE, COWARDLY BEAT [...] HIP HOP ENDORSES TYRANNY [...] HIP HOP IS INARTICULATE, INFANTILE AND UNSEXY," blared one particularly shouty *NME* reader's letter in mid-1987. Luckily the writer had a savior in mind: Morrissey, hailed by this self-described "Smiths disciple" as an artist who "cherishes the word and explores the fantastic textures of the English language." Hip-hop artists, by contrast, were accused not just of a lack of literary flair but of attempting "TO DESTROY LANGUAGE" altogether.[96] Given his role in 1980s British indie, Morrissey was a natural counterpoint to hip-hop and "black music" more generally, but he was not always identified as such in positive terms. In the late summer of 1986, Paolo Hewitt attacked standalone Smiths single "Panic" and its chorus hook of "Burn down the disco, hang the blessed DJ/Because the music that they constantly play, it says nothing to me about my life."[97] For Hewitt, these "offensive lines" were easily interpreted as referencing "the black music played in clubs." It revealed "a lot about the music industry," he asserted, that "a white singer like Morrissey" was treated "as some kind of messiah" while so many Black artists went underappreciated.[98] Predictably, Hewitt was rebuked by readers, and defended himself by urging fans to think about how the "attendant imagery" of "Panic" could be interpreted by The Smiths' "predominantly white audience."[99] This only prompted further hostility.[100] The ways in which many readers constructed links between race and musical taste were often on full display in these rebuttals. "I am not black [...] therefore, for the most part, black music [...] evokes nothing in me," noted one jarringly simplistic letter.[101]

In the late 1980s and (particularly) early 1990s Morrissey became a lightning rod for anxieties about racism and, on a less explicit level, whiteness in the *NME*. Given his status as a key figure in the *NME*'s curation of indie culture, and as an icon for a sizable chunk of the paper's audience, any suggestion that Morrissey might harbor racist attitudes were keenly felt by writers, editors, and readers. Responses to these accusations, especially during a moment of particularly intense controversy in 1992, thus reveal much about how the *NME* continued to act as a site of racial formation in the years after its retreat from emphasizing hip-hop and Black British music in the mid-late 1980s.

Morrissey displayed a concern with defending whiteness from the height of The Smiths' 1980s fame onwards, playing (surprisingly overtly) into a narrative of white victimhood that had been inculcated in Britain through the politics of Powellism—and which, as we have seen, occasionally showed its face on the *NME* letters page.[102] Only weeks after Hewitt had criticized "Panic" in the *NME*, the singer gave an inflammatory interview to *Melody Maker*. "Obviously to get on 'Top of the Pops' these days, one has to be, by law, black," he

[96] Laura, in "Angst," *NME*, 13 June 1987, 50.

[97] The Smiths, "Panic," *Panic* (Rough Trade, 1986).

[98] Paolo Hewitt, "Paint the Town House Black," *NME*, 2 August 1986, 38. Criticism could also have focused on the band's artwork, as discussed in Andrew Warnes, "Black, White, and Blue: The Racial Antagonism of The Smiths' Record Sleeves," *Popular Music* 27, no. 1 (2008), 135–49.

[99] Paolo Hewitt, in "Bag," *NME*, 16 August 1986, 54.

[100] See, for instance, several of the letters in "Shakin Bag," *NME*, 23 August 1986, 50.

[101] Richard Morrison, in "Flak Bag," *NME*, 1 November 1986, 58.

[102] On the popularization of this politics, see Jack Hanlon, "The Meat Porter: Metropolitan Labour, 'Rivers of Blood', and the White Working Class," *History Workshop Journal* 99 (2025): 123–49; Camilla Schofield, *Enoch Powell and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (Cambridge, 2013), 208–63; Amy Whipple, "Revisiting the 'Rivers of Blood' Controversy: Letters to Enoch Powell," *Journal of British Studies* 48, no. 3 (2009): 717–35.

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asserted, directly implying a conspiracy to promote Black artists over white.[103] In reality, music television (*Top of the Pops* included) mirrored the wider industry in its limited coverage of emergent Black artists.[104] In the same interview Morrissey branded reggae as "the most racist music in the entire world"; it was, he maintained, "a total glorification of black supremacy."[105] As the anti-hip-hop backlash in the *NME* implied, views of this nature were not entirely uncommon and, as if to prove this point, no sustained outrage greeted Morrissey's comments. Only one unreservedly critical response made it into *Melody Maker*'s letters page.[106] Many of the Smiths' music press supporters responded only to protect Morrissey, reinforcing the hierarchical racialized dynamics of their papers in the process. Soon-to-be *NME* editor Danny Kelly alighted upon a particularly appalling turn of phrase in doing so: "On the racism charge," Kelly asserted, "any judge would declare Morrissey the hapless victim of a lynch mob."[107]

A similar pattern continued into the early years of Morrissey's solo career, despite some provocative moves, like the release of two songs easily interpretable as justifying prejudice against British Asians.[108] By the time of 1992's *Your Arsenal*, Morrissey had also established an interest in the skinhead subculture, which—thanks to the actions of a thuggish minority—had become popularly associated with violent racism and hooliganism.[109] The skinhead, he told *NME*, appealed because it was "an entirely British invention," a flawed interpretation that provided the basis for "We'll Let You Know," a song depicting skinhead football hooligans as "the last truly British people you will ever know."[110] More problematic still was "The National Front Disco." This song's lyrics narrated a young man's move to the far right and utilized the well-known far right slogan "England for the English" as a chorus hook.[111] Reviewers largely failed to critique the problematics of race and nation championed by these songs, with *Q* even praising Morrissey for a "bold willingness to reopen old debates."[112] The same edition of the magazine saw the singer delve deeper into the Powellite playbook by expressing a belief in inevitable racial conflict: "I don't want to sound horrible or pessimistic but I don't really think," Morrissey maintained, "that black people and white people will ever really get on or like each other."[113]

It was against the backdrop of these remarks that Morrissey performed in London as part of a two-day event (dubbed Madstock), held to mark the reunion of ska group Madness, who had themselves denied far right sympathies early on in their career.[114] Post-event reports implied that a small minority of Madstock attendees were far right skinheads.[115] Coming at a moment of heightened political racism, leading to the horrific murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 and a brief local electoral victory for the fascist British National Party the same

[103] Morrissey, quoted in Frank Owen, "Home Thoughts From Abroad," *Melody Maker*, 27 September 1986, 16.

[104] Sarita Malik, *Representing Black Britain: A History of Black and Asian Images on British Television* (Sage Publications, 2002), 114–18.

[105] Morrissey, quoted in Owen, "Home Thoughts," 16.

[106] "Backlash," *Melody Maker*, 11 October 1986, 31.

[107] Danny Kelly, "Exile on Mainstream," *NME*, 14 February 1987, 44.

[108] Zuberi, *Sounds English*, 25–27, 63–64.

[109] The complexities of skinhead associations with the far right are discussed in Matthew Worley, "Oi! Oi! Oi! Class, Locality, and British Punk," *Twentieth Century British History* 24, no. 4 (2013), 606–36.

[110] Morrissey, quoted in Stuart Maconie, "Morrissey Comes Out! (For a Drink)," *NME*, 18 May 1991, 34; Morrissey, "We'll Let You Know," *Your Arsenal* (HMV, 1992). In reality, skinheads borrowed heavily from Jamaican rude boy culture: Hebdige, *Subculture*, 54–59.

[111] Morrissey, "The National Front Disco," *Your Arsenal*. For an analysis, see Zuberi, *Sounds English*, 57–58.

[112] John Aizlewood, "Loving," *Q*, September 1992, 92.

[113] Morrissey, quoted in Adrian Deevoy, "Ooh I Say!," *Q*, September 1992, 63–64.

[114] See, for instance, Deanne Pearson, "Madness: Nice Band, Shame About the Fans," *NME*, 24 November 1979, 6–8.

[115] "Morrissey Bottles Out of Madstock," *NME*, 15 August 1992, 2.

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year, the presence of this minority was perhaps inevitable.[116] Less so was Morrissey taking to the stage against a backdrop of two enormous photos of teenage skinheads, playing a set that included both "We'll Let You Know" and "The National Front Disco," and waving a Union Jack (still associated by many at this time with its use by the far right) at the crowd. These provocations did not win him many friends on the day. Crowd hostility (politically motivated or otherwise) ended the set early, and a scheduled repeat show the following day was cancelled.[117] Some initial responses highlighted the irony here. As the *NME*'s review observed, "Here [Morrissey] is faced with what was meant to be his natural constituency, a very English, white audience, and [he] is rejected." "So much for flirting with white trash and notions of Anglo-Saxon culture," it continued, and "for wearing a Union Jack onstage."[118]

For Dele Fadele, the paper's only regular Black contributor, much more needed to be said. Fadele's writing frequently addressed race. He eviscerated Black artists that he felt undermined anti-racist struggles, like Californian gangsta rappers N.W.A.[119] He raised race in interviews.[120] On the letters page, he challenged reader constructions of "black music" and of Blackness itself.[121] Shortly before Madstock, he also attacked the Union Jack: "Ever since the National Front hijacked [it] for [their] own purposes," he wrote, "national pride has been synonymous with fascism at the very least."[122] Unsurprisingly, Morrissey's antics infuriated Fadele. He was determined that the paper act, persuading Kelly (then editor) not only to publish a response, but to make it a cover story.[123] The front page—headlined "Flying the Flag or Flirting With Disaster?"—captured the singer on stage, flag in hand.[124]

Inside, coverage reflected a broader societal reluctance to imagine the intersections between whiteness and racism existing outside the far right.[125] Significant space was devoted to explaining the relationship between the skinhead aesthetic and racist politics. Morrissey's past statements on race were recounted without being overtly critiqued and Hewitt's 1986 attack on "Panic" was dismissed as the paper having "made a fool of itself." The coverage was framed as a warning, in line with the *NME*'s history of standing up to musical flirtations with fascism. Even this point, however, apparently could not be made without criticizing a Black artist: American rapper Ice Cube, described as "a bigoted idiot" next to Morrissey, who was merely being too ambiguous in his patriotism.[126]

[116] On the British National Party in the early 1990s, see Nigel Copsey, *Contemporary British Fascism: The British National Party and the Quest for Legitimacy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 51–75. Events surrounding Stephen Lawrence's murder were placed in broader context in Stuart Hall, "From Scarman to Stephen Lawrence," *History Workshop Journal* 48 (1999): 187–97.

[117] The singer's management blamed the hostility on (among others) a coin-throwing "National Front skinhead" in the crowd, as quoted in "Morrissey Bottles Out."

[118] Ian McCann, "Essex 'n' Suggs 'n' Rock 'n' Roll," *NME*, 15 August 1992, 44.

[119] See, for example, Dele Fadele, "Blaxploitation of Millions," *NME*, 30 November 1991, 35

[120] See, for instance, Dele Fadele, "Spookspeople for a Generation," *NME*, 25 January 1992, 31

[121] Examples include Dele Fadele, in "Only Angst Can Do This," *NME*, 9 November 1991, 58; Dele Fadele, in "Face the Future With Angst," *NME*, 2 February 1991, 50.

[122] Dele Fadele, in "Angst," *NME*, 18 April 1992, 46. Ironically, the flag had featured on a recent front page: "Rising Sons: Blur Fly the Flag in Japan," *NME*, 28 March 1992, 1.

[123] Long, *History of the NME*, 191–93.

[124] "Flying the Flag or Flirting With Disaster?," *NME*, 22 August 1992, 1.

[125] For the original formulation of this argument, see Gilroy, *Ain't No Black*, 153–54. For a fuller analysis, see Tony Kushner, "The Fascist as 'Other'? Racism and Neo-Nazism in Contemporary Britain," *Patterns of Prejudice* 28, no. 1 (1994): 27–45. For a less developed early version of my analysis of Madstock centered on the cultural resonance of fascism visible in the controversy, see Benjamin Bland, "Extremism in the British Underground: Subcultural Fascism(s) and Their Reflections in Music Culture, c. 1975–1999" (PhD diss., University of London, 2019), 221–35.

[126] Danny Kelly, Gavin Martin and Andrew Collins, "This Alarming Man," *NME*, 22 August 1992, 14–16.

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Only Fadele's contribution had more interesting things to say. It referenced imperial legacies, the Powellite undertones of some of Morrissey's lyrics and interview statements, and the dubiousness of the flag as a pop symbol. His piece was still cautious and avoided any direct accusations. It did, however, clarify that Morrissey's intentions and affiliations were less of a concern than the fact that the singer's actions could be read by some fans as a justification for intolerance.[127] The whiteness of Morrissey and the majority of his fans was left unspoken by Fadele here, even as his article rendered it obvious and pointed to the dangers embedded within a popular music culture that not only drew racialized boundaries between genres and fanbases, but also refused to acknowledge the power of whiteness.

The importance of this assessment was not enough to convince many *NME* readers that the paper was justified in its approach. Hostile responses to the coverage flooded the paper's office. "Do you really think that Morrissey's ambiguous jingoism is going to turn a nation of free thinking liberals into gestapo commandants?" asked one sarcastic reader. "I'm bloody sick of your right-on, wishy-washy, liberal idealism," ranted another. A reader from Manchester even accused Fadele of "incredible ignorance" for daring to suggest that the Union Jack could still be seen as a symbol of prejudice.[128] Others denied the singer could have racist views because of his Irish parentage, refuted the idea that musicians should be expected to have coherent political stances, and accused writers of cynically using events to try and sell papers.[129] Some also defended racism or expressed racist views themselves. "We all know racism is a hideous trait, but if Morrissey wishes to dislike blacks, Asians, or even tall people then THAT IS UP TO HIM," one fan insisted, before reminding the *NME* that "It is a free country."[130] The majority of published reader reactions confirmed an unpleasant truth about the paper, previously indicated by negative responses to hip-hop and "black music" in the 1980s. Large sections of the *NME* audience not only jealously guarded the paper as an ostensibly white domain, but also resented attempts to illustrate popular music culture's own complicity in broader societal racism.

Some Morrissey fans did commend the paper. "Thankfully the *NME* didn't take their usual defensive, often sycophantic position with Moz, but instead offered an extremely impressive, investigative piece of music journalism on this most urgent issue," stressed a reader from Hull. Another asserted that it was "about time that Morrissey was confronted on these issues."[131] Several sympathetic letters were deeply emotional, not least those written by fans of color. A self-identified "Pakistani" reader from Huddersfield sounded heartbroken, having become "resigned to the fact that Morrissey, who I once loved and idolised, is a racist." Another "Asian" correspondent recounted experiences of racial harassment while acknowledging that "The music of The Smiths was a way of life for me and still is." This letter ended with a plea to the singer: "Morrissey, stop this shit now!"[132] Lawrence Renee, "an Afro-Caribbean Morrissey fan" from North London explicitly placed events in the context not only of racial violence and harassment but also (almost uniquely) of the overwhelming whiteness of indie music. "The everyday reality of racism via physical/mental abuse can't be casually brushed aside when black people are made to feel

[127] Dele Fadele, "Caucasian Rut," *NME*, 22 August 1992, 12–13.

[128] Julian Brown, David Kenning and Bernard Peters, in "Angst," *NME*, 5 September 1992, 62.

[129] See various letters in "Angst," *NME*, 29 August 1992, 54; "Angst," 5 September 1992; "Angst," *NME*, 12 September 1992, 58.

[130] "Morrissey's Conjugal Bedroom," in "Angst," 5 September 1992. Emphasis in original. Presumably the letter writer was assigned their credited name by the editor of the letters page. For overtly racist letters, see Kenning, in "Angst," 5 September 1992; "Unreadable Chimpanzee Scrawl," in "Angst," 12 September 1992.

[131] Victoria Cullen and Emyr R. Evans, in "Angst," 5 September 1992.

[132] Amar and "Anonymous," in "Angst," 12 September 1992.

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uncomfortable and unwelcome at indie concerts and clubs," Renee stressed.[133] He went on to write an extensive piece for Morrissey fanzine *Miserable Lies* on this theme.[134] His words had some impact. As one white fan admitted in the following edition of the zine, they "(and probably most white people) [had] underestimate[d] the impact of what [Morrissey] has written and reportedly said on black or Asian people." Whatever the singer's intention, "The flirtation with skinhead imagery and the Union Jack," he lamented, "*really has hurt people*."[135]

The *NME*'s Madstock response did, then, help push some white Morrissey fans (however limited in number) to reflect on their own identities and positionalities, producing a rare moment in which a key constituency of British popular music culture came close to recognizing whiteness as more than just a normative, apolitical condition. It also helped give a voice to fans of color genuinely distressed by Morrissey's activity. Seen in the context provided by the mid-late 1980s coverage of Black British music and hip-hop that preceded it, the controversy helped expose the fragile racialized dynamics that underpinned late twentieth-century popular music culture in Britain by drawing attention to the relative ease with which the ostensibly ordinary whiteness of indie could slip into a more threatening guise. A relatively unique set of circumstances was needed for this to take place—and any destabilization of the *NME*'s hegemonic whiteness that occurred as a result would not have occurred without the efforts of writers and readers of color. Unsurprisingly, there were those who felt the paper had not gone far enough. Cornershop, a rare indie band to feature British Asian musicians, began burning posters of Morrissey on stage at their gigs, partly to express their anger at the singer and partly (as frontman Tjinder Singh later recalled) because they believed the music press was "pussyfooting around the issue and using it to sell papers" and then "leaving it at that."[136] Eventually, Morrissey's politics would be clarified by support for the far right For Britain party, several years after another run-in with the *NME*.[137] As the 1990s wore on, however, the resonances of the Madstock controversy were felt most of all in the revival of an unabashedly *national* popular music.

Conclusion

By the mid-1990s *NME* readers could have been forgiven for looking back on the Morrissey-Madstock controversy with bemusement. The Union Jack was now everywhere, and the *NME* was helping to lead the charge for Britpop: a nostalgic and overwhelmingly white movement that married British rock stylings from the 1960s and 1970s to a flag-waving, cultural anti-Americanism. At the forefront of the broader cultural phenomenon of Cool Britannia, Britpop was not only at the center of the music press's vision of 1990s Britain but was also gratefully incorporated into the optimistic populism of Tony Blair and New Labour.[138] It has thus come, unsurprisingly, to dominate much popular memory of 1990s Britain, in the process obscuring the exceptional diversity and cultural hybridity visible in

[133] Lawrence Renee, in "Angst," *NME*, 19 September 1992, 58. A much briefer letter on the same theme came a few weeks earlier: Angie Lewis, in "Angst," *NME*, 22 August 1992, 57. See also Angie Lewis, in "Angst," *NME*, 19 January 1991, 46; "Face the Future With Angst."

[134] Lawrence Renee, "Mein Camp," *Miserable Lies* 3 (1993), 7–12.

[135] Laurence Hughes, "More Maddening Views," *Miserable Lies* 4 (1993), 9. Emphasis in original.

[136] Tjinder Singh, quoted in Hyder, *Brimful of Asia*, 93; Steven Wells, "Welcome to the Counter Culture," *NME*, 21 November 1992, 13.

[137] Tim Jonze, "Bigmouth Strikes Again and Again: Why Morrissey Fans Feel So Betrayed," *Guardian*, 30 May 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/may/30/bigmouth-strikes-again-morrissey-songs-loneliness-shyness-misfits-far-right-party-tonight-show-jimmy-fallon/.

[138] For a journalistic account, see John Harris, *The Last Party: Britpop, Blair, and the Demise of English Rock* (Fourth Estate, 2004). For an oral history, see Daniel Rachel, *Don't Look Back in Anger: The Rise and Fall of Cool Britannia* (Trapeze, 2019).

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other prominent musical styles of the time, including jungle and trip-hop. Britpop did, as Nabeel Zuberi reminds us, feature a small minority of musicians of color and, as such, critiques of the movement can be "too neatly racialized." Yet it is difficult to escape the sense that the scene reaffirmed, at least partly, a preexisting conception of British popular music as white.[139]

The *NME* would go on to play an important part in this process over the course of the 1990s, although it was monthly rival *Select* that spearheaded the charge. A famous flag-toting 1993 front cover was backed by manifesto-esque pieces from former *NME* writers Stuart Maconie and Andrew Harrison, who both defended Morrissey in the course of endorsing pop patriotism.[140] Maconie even directly borrowed a hip-hop comparison from the *NME*'s Madstock coverage, rebuking "white male rock journalists" for indulging "the loathsome and provocative racism of Ice Cube" and mirroring the rhetoric of mid-late 1980s reader attacks on the paper in the process.[141] On one level, then, Britpop can be read as a natural outcome of the developments evident in the late twentieth-century *NME*. It not only rejected the premise that whiteness and nationalism combined to dangerous effect, but it also harkened back to a British pop heritage that predated both the revolutionary innovations of hip-hop (or, for that matter, the diverse dance music cultures that also grew over the late 1980s and early 1990s) and the growth of a self-consciously Black British musical culture. As critics of Britpop have long observed, this was a scene that also promoted a particular vision of white masculinity, becoming a central part of the decade's broader "lad culture" phenomenon.[142] As it dominated the mainstream music press in the mid-late 1990s, then, Britpop exacerbated the longer-term siloing of music along racialized lines and further clarified the gendered and nationalist dimensions of this process. It thus acted as confirmation of the prejudices and hierarchies that had, however briefly, appeared under threat in the mid-1980s *NME* and that then found themselves under renewed scrutiny through the Madstock controversy in the early 1990s.

At the same time, the examples I have deployed indicate that conceptions of race and difference were absolutely fundamental in structuring key elements of popular music culture in late twentieth-century Britain. Race shaped the reporting that appeared in the music press, the reception this writing received from readers, and the ways in which musicians discussed their work and its function. The consistent reinforcement of whiteness in a popular music institution like the *NME* was baked into long-established modes of criticism and patterns of discourse that constantly accentuated difference and contributed to processes of racial formation. Whiteness was constructed against the idiom of "black music" and then, when necessary, defended against perceived incursions or accusations of hierarchy. Equally significant was the relationship between the *NME* and its readership, predicated as it was on an implicit acceptance that the paper catered (and was responsible) to a white audience that desired music that reflected their own perspectives and experiences. Members of this audience did not passively consume the constructions of race that appeared in the *NME* but often played an active role in producing and (on occasion) challenging them. These interactions helped ensure that the *NME* contributed to the maintenance of what Irene Morra has called "an inherently exclusive canon" of British popular music.[143] Analysis of

[139] Zuberi, *Sounds English*, 64–68.

[140] "Yanks Go Home! Suede, St Etienne, Denim, Pulp, The Auteurs, and the Battle for Britain," *Select*, April 1993, 1; Stuart Maconie, "Who Do You Think You Are Kidding, Mr Cobain?," *Select*, April 1993, 60–67; Andrew Harrison, "We'd Rather Jack," *Select*, April 1993, 67.

[141] Maconie, "Who Do You Think," 67.

[142] For an introductory analysis, see Stan Hawkins, "Unsettling Differences: Music and Laddism in Britpop," in *Britpop and the English Musical Tradition*, ed. Andy Bennett and Jon Stratton (Ashgate, 2010), 145–59. I am currently completing a more historically in-depth analysis of class, race, and gender in the Britpop 1990s.

[143] Morra, *Britishness*, 142.

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popular music and the media that surrounded it thus helps expand our understandings of where, when, and how race has operated in modern Britain. For all its nominally progressive politics and its clear multicultural dimensions, popular music culture nonetheless helped sustain long-term trajectories of racialized exclusion into the final years of the twentieth century.

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