

---

## Too Black, Too Noisy

Frankie Crocker, Black programmer at New York City Black-Oriented station WBLS, swore that he heard his station everywhere in the summer of 1980: “We can walk out in the street and hear the sound on both sides of the street. Go to any park [and] you’re going to hear WBLS.”<sup>1</sup> The numbers confirmed his observation; over the previous twelve months, WBLS reached more radios than any other station in the metro area. Crocker’s achievement was noteworthy. A Black-Oriented station had never before topped the New York City market—the largest radio market in the country—for an entire year. And Crocker, to many observers, was the brains behind this achievement. To mark the occasion, trade journal *Black Radio Exclusive* dedicated an issue of its weekly magazine to WBLS and deemed Crocker the “radio active catalyst” behind the station’s remarkable success. “Special tribute,” the journal declared, should be awarded to Crocker, as “God has blessed us all through [his] talents.”<sup>2</sup>

Listeners tuning in to WBLS, however, weren’t hearing what would become the most influential sound of the decade: rap. The week that *Black Radio Exclusive* published these accolades, it calculated that the fourth-most-played single on Black-Oriented radio stations was Kurtis Blow’s “The Breaks,” the first rap release on a major label and the first rap record certified gold by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA). But the genre, the story goes, was “too black” for Crocker to play on his station, even though WBLS belonged to the radio format that played music by mostly Black musicians for a mostly Black audience.<sup>3</sup>

The following summer, Black-Oriented radio trade publication *Jack the Rapper* (known within the industry as “Jack the Rapper’s Mello Yello” for the not-at-all-mellow color of paper it was printed on) published some far-less celebratory coverage about Crocker. A cartoon printed on the back page of an August 1981 issue depicts him walking into WBLS while holding hands with two white women. What appear to be two young Black men follow behind, asking if he will “play our rap record please?” Crocker responds, laughing, “I don’t play Black owned companies [*sic*] records!”<sup>4</sup>

These two portrayals of Crocker—the dynamic talent behind the country’s most successful Black-Oriented station and the programmer unwilling to play rap—encapsulate the world of Black-Oriented radio into which rap was born. Throughout the early 1980s, Black-Oriented stations were reluctant to play the genre for reasons that emerge through the examination of two intersecting narratives.

The first is a story about the economics of the radio industry. Rap emerged as a commercial genre just when many Black-Oriented stations were changing their programming to attract whiter and wealthier audiences while downplaying ties to local Black communities. To attract advertisers notoriously biased against Black audiences, stations widened—and whitened—their target demographics, choosing music that they hoped would attract middle- and upper-class Black and white adult listeners. While songs by Black musicians were increasingly popular with white audiences, programmers didn’t consider rap music to have the same crossover potential. Stations later known as Urban (or Urban Contemporary) were looking for precisely the opposite audience of that which rap attracted, according to programmers. Rap wasn’t just too Black to be played on stations like Crocker’s; the genre’s listeners were reputed to be too poor, too young, *and* too Black.

The second story concerns the music itself. Industry support for genre-blending music by white artists combined with pressure on Black artists to cross over made it difficult for rap to find airplay on Urban stations. In the early 1980s, most record companies and radio stations were more inclined to support white artists than Black ones, even if the two made the same style of music. White artists—blithely ignorant or not of the prejudices facing rap as it entered onto radio—began incorporating rapped vocals in their music, providing radio programmers with a whiter version of the genre. Meanwhile, the recording industry encouraged Black artists to make music aimed at white audiences even as these artists endured criticism from listeners for doing just that. Together, these blended musical styles left little room for Black rap artists on Black-Oriented station playlists. While a few rap acts such as Whodini found airplay on this format, these stations’ reluctance to play rap prevented it from crossing over to other formats.

#### BROADCASTING TO BLACK LISTENERS

The history of Black-Oriented radio in the US begins not with stations, but with shows. In the 1920s, some stations targeting a diverse range of listeners broadcast several hours of programming for Black audiences.<sup>5</sup> For example, in 1929, Chicago station WSBC began broadcasting what DJ Jack L. Cooper claimed was the first program produced by Black Americans, “The Negro Hour,” alongside programming aimed at listeners of Italian, Jewish, Lithuanian, Polish, Slovenian, and other backgrounds.<sup>6</sup> In 1954, *Sponsor* magazine tallied 398 stations that played

material designed for Black audiences, though usually for less than ten hours a week.<sup>7</sup> Presenting shows made for Black audiences, of course, didn't preclude non-Black listenership; for example, radio has often provided an access point for white audiences "listening in" on media representations of Black life.<sup>8</sup> But even as stations facilitated this type of encounter, in playing these shows they demonstrated just how segregated the industry—not to mention the world around it—was.

By midcentury, some stations began targeting their programming more consistently toward Black audiences. In the late 1940s, two white station owners in Memphis increased the amount of programming for Black listeners on their station WDIA until it became the first station that aimed all of its programming toward this audience. While its owners were motivated more by economics than a social imperative, WDIA and stations like it understood minority listeners to be the majority of their audience, and so created an uninterrupted space for Black expression and politics. WDIA, in the words of its co-owner John Pepper, "became more than just an entertainment medium. . . . It became sort of a spokesman, a part of the black community."<sup>9</sup> Stations like WDIA often supported the growth of Black-music-focused record labels; in Memphis, for example, connections with WDIA helped Stax Records promote their artists.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, what came to be known as the *Black* format expanded in response to demographic changes and increasing major-label support of Black artists. Most notably, in the 1970s, the Columbia Record Group invested in several Black-music-focused record companies and signed a significant number of Black artists, prompted by a commissioned Harvard Business School student report about the financial viability of the Black music industry.<sup>11</sup> Other record companies followed suit. Enticed by major label backing and the associated promotional support, some station owners began dabbling in Black-Oriented radio in the 1970s; by 1985, 8 percent of all US radio stations were aimed at Black audiences.<sup>12</sup>

As Memphis's WDIA illustrated, Black-Oriented programming did not always correspond with Black ownership. Ownership not only financially benefits local Black communities, but allows these same communities to freely interpret issues and express opinions. As Cathy Hughes, the founder of Black-Oriented communications company Radio One Inc., insists, "the ability to interpret who you are . . . is the difference between life and death for our community. It's the difference between slavery and liberation."<sup>13</sup> In 1970, only sixteen of the more than eight thousand stations in the country were Black-owned, and seven of these had some white investors.<sup>14</sup> Black ownership levels began rising towards the end of the decade thanks to a 1978 federal minority ownership incentive program, which authorized loans to minority buyers and offered tax credits to those selling stations to minorities.<sup>15</sup> By 1986, *Black Radio Exclusive* counted 150 "Black-Owned/Controlled" stations across the country in many formats including Urban Contemporary, Country, Oldies, Top 40, and Spanish/Talk.<sup>16</sup> The incentive program was short-lived, lasting only until 1995, but during its existence close to three hundred radio licenses were

sold to owners of color, raising the proportion of minority-owned radio stations to around 3 percent nationally, more than half of which were Black-owned.<sup>17</sup>

As the Black-Oriented format grew, it became a “major force in constructing and sustaining an African American public sphere,” whether that meant broadcasting specific songs to covertly call protesters to the streets during the 1963 civil rights struggle in Birmingham, staying on the air all night (despite white owners’ objections) to support Black communities following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, or highlighting community voices and holding voter registration drives during the Los Angeles uprising in 1992.<sup>18</sup> These stations typically hired Black DJs who advocated for their local Black listeners and engaged in political activism; one programmer soberly noted that if these stations didn’t pay attention to Black communities, “nobody else [was] going to.”<sup>19</sup> Of course, this community focus wasn’t solely altruistic; community commitment, according to many pieces in trade journals, was one strategic advantage Black-Oriented stations had over other formats.<sup>20</sup>

By the 1980s, Black-Oriented radio was understood to have a larger and more persuasive reach than other types of media aimed at Black Americans, including newspapers and the recently launched Black Entertainment Television network.<sup>21</sup> One programmer estimated at the beginning of the decade that Black audiences listened to the radio for around 20 percent of their day, at least six days a week. The format not only entertained but could “control, dictate, [and] captivate” the Black public.<sup>22</sup> It did this, in part, through its music selection, playing mostly songs by Black artists; many programmers considered music to be central to how their local Black community expressed its identity.<sup>23</sup>

So in the fall of 1979 when Sylvia and Joe Robinson, the Black owners of Sugar Hill Records, released “Rapper’s Delight,” a song in which Black musicians rapped on top of a beat taken from a song performed by other Black musicians, Black-Oriented radio seemed the natural place to promote the record. But Black-Oriented radio stations in New York proved hesitant.<sup>24</sup> The track had a strange and novel sound, a spoken-word record response to the summer’s disco hit “Good Times,” and it was released on a rebranded, independent label whose owners were making a sharp stylistic shift (Sylvia Robinson was best known for her sensual 1973 disco track “Pillow Talk,” released on the couple’s label All Platinum, which later went bankrupt). More importantly, the song’s racial identity was a problem: “Rapper’s Delight” was the record that *Billboard* reported Frankie Crocker thought was “too black” to play on his station.<sup>25</sup>

Luckily for the Robinsons, a programmer at a Black-Oriented station in East St. Louis took a chance on the record and the song quickly proved popular.<sup>26</sup> Back in New York, one of the first stations to program the record played it as a joke, which led to “thousands and thousands of calls” requesting it.<sup>27</sup> And the rest is history, although there’s no official record of how many copies the track sold since the Robinsons refused to pay the RIAA to audit their books in order to certify these sales.<sup>28</sup>

As the Robinsons used their earnings from “Rapper’s Delight” to finance other rap singles, including Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “Freedom” and the Sugarhill Gang’s follow-up single “8th Wonder,” they noticed that their records hardly received any airplay despite selling well. The major obstacle, as Sylvia Robinson revealed in an interview published in *Black Radio Exclusive*, was that some Black programmers said that Sugar Hill’s “product was too black for them.”<sup>29</sup> What did it mean for a style of music to be “too black” to be played on stations aimed primarily at Black audiences? To make sense of this, it’s necessary to understand the economic pressures that Black-Oriented stations faced at the time.

### MONETIZING BLACK AUDIENCES

While record companies make money by selling records to people, radio stations invite another actor into this system, using music to sell listener attention to advertisers who buy time on their station. For a radio station to turn a profit, the income from advertisements needs to at least offset the costs of hiring staff, running promotions, keeping the lights on, and in many cases paying off the loan from the initial purchase of the station.<sup>30</sup> Covering these costs at many Black-Oriented stations was difficult because of an industry-wide disparity between advertising rates at Black-Oriented stations and those stations aimed primarily at white audiences.

Advertising agencies buying time on radio stations in the 1980s and early 1990s defined target audiences primarily through five categories: income, gender, race, ethnicity, and age. The companies that radio stations employed to measure audience size and composition during this era, however, only regularly measured gender and age, and programmers compensated for this lack of information by using music to approximate the other characteristics.<sup>31</sup> Assuming a reflective correspondence between performer and listener, programmers roughly estimated the racial and ethnic makeup of their audience by looking at the artists on their playlists, although stations often commissioned additional research to verify these claims. Income was perhaps the hardest of these categories for stations to measure, and throughout this era race and musical taste were often used as proxies for socioeconomic class. Advertisers and programmers simplistically assumed that non-white listeners were less wealthy than their white counterparts and that classical and jazz listeners were more “upscale” than other audiences.<sup>32</sup>

While multicultural marketing practices were increasing the profile of Black consumers within the advertising industry, many companies that advertised on the radio refused to buy time on Black-Oriented stations. These biases were often based on racist assumptions that Black listeners didn’t have the financial resources to buy their goods or didn’t make a habit of doing so, indicating the extent to which race often stands in for socioeconomic class in the United States.<sup>33</sup> For example, the general manager of a station in Houston reported in the early 1980s that he had been told that “blacks don’t eat pizza” after approaching a pizza chain to buy

advertising time on his station.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, in the mid-1990s, members of the National Association of Black-Owned Broadcasters recalled being told that “Black people don’t eat beef” and “Black people don’t eat mayonnaise.”<sup>35</sup> Tom Joyner, the Black DJ who famously spent part of his career commuting daily from Dallas to Chicago for two different shows, divulged in the late 1980s that these prejudices came from all sorts of companies—including A&W, Moosehead Breweries, Johnson & Johnson, and a major airline—all of which refused to buy time because of “no ethnic” or “no black” mandates.<sup>36</sup>

Other companies believed that targeting Black consumers would limit their products’ appeal because they assumed white consumers would not purchase products associated with the Black public.<sup>37</sup> For example, one marketing expert stated that Japanese car companies worried that featuring a Black driver in their ads would “diminish the value of the car because [white audiences were] not seeing themselves behind the wheel.”<sup>38</sup> Plenty of companies obfuscated how race informed their audience preferences by claiming that they wanted an older audience, saying that they simply felt “more comfortable” airing their commercials on other stations, or using vague “no-ethnic” mandates that helped shield them from accusations of racial discrimination.<sup>39</sup> But, according to WBLS’s general manager Charles Warfield, it was clear to Black-Oriented stations that the primary concern was “the color of your audience.”<sup>40</sup>

These widespread prejudices made it more difficult for Black-Oriented stations to operate because they decreased advertising rates on these stations. A study found that in 1986, Adult Contemporary stations could charge advertisers about twice as much as Black-Oriented stations (for a comparably sized audience), and that rates at AOR, Top 40, and Hispanic-Oriented stations split the difference; these rates remained relatively unchanged over the next decade.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, respondents to a 1996 study estimated that advertiser prejudice against minority audiences reduced the price of around 60 percent of their ads.<sup>42</sup> It’s worth noting that these sorts of mandates didn’t apply equally to all stations aimed at minority listeners; some “no ethnic” directives applied only to Black-owned, rather than Black-Oriented, stations.<sup>43</sup> Put another way, who was getting paid—and who controlled a station’s image and messaging—could matter more than who the audience was.

#### FROM BLACK TO URBAN

Speaking of getting paid, this all meant that stations looking to increase profits had two choices: change advertisers’ minds or change the station’s audience. Changing advertisers’ minds wasn’t impossible, although it took time and effort. Some Black-Oriented programmers thought that quantitative metrics would help stations demonstrate the size of their audience and urged their colleagues to improve their long-term numbers as measured by Arbitron, a major audience-measurement service that was regularly criticized for underrepresenting minority listeners.<sup>44</sup> Other

stations created individual market profiles for advertisers who they believed were incorrectly biased against Black audiences. One Philadelphia station, for example, designed a survey to help persuade a local car dealership to advertise on the station after being told by an agency that “Blacks don’t buy this kind of car. Blacks don’t have the money to buy it. And if they did buy it, you’d . . . have to repossess it inside of three months.”<sup>45</sup>

Many programmers, however, opted to change their audience. Recognizing that Black and white listeners’ tastes were expanding to include much of the same music, some stations began trying to attract more white listeners. Relying on the integrationist idea that Black musicians could have mass appeal, these stations played music by Black performers—such as Prince, Michael Jackson, and Lionel Richie—but also added similar-sounding music by non-Black performers like Hall & Oates, Michael McDonald, and Culture Club.<sup>46</sup> Music scholar David Brackett claims that by cultivating an audience defined not by race but rather by their ability to consume, these stations “render[ed] the format more attractive to advertisers.”<sup>47</sup>

As the format’s previously popular name, Black, overtly referenced the race of its primary audience, a race-neutral rebranding was necessary to indicate to advertising agencies these stations’ distance from a Black audience. Consequently, these stations most often called their formatting *Urban* or *Urban Contemporary*.<sup>48</sup> Like all format names, Urban/Urban Contemporary indicated both the style of music played on these stations and the desired audience demographic that programmers hoped to attract with that music. These stations played “contemporary music for urban dwellers,” though of course not everybody who lived in an urban area was Black, as one programmer made sure to note.<sup>49</sup> This format was noticeably “not as ethnic” as the Black format, so much so that programmer Al Parker of Pascagoula, Mississippi hoped that “the white listener, at times, doesn’t even realize he’s tuned to an Urban Contemporary station.”<sup>50</sup> This “linguistic evasion,” as *Billboard* columnist and critic Nelson George describes the format change, was an attempt to catch the ears of Black professionals and like-minded white listeners rather than young and less economically advantaged populations, such as those that rap was associated with.<sup>51</sup> It wasn’t coincidental that the name Urban Contemporary closely resembled Adult Contemporary: both catered to adult listeners.<sup>52</sup>

Arguably the first station to make this change was Frankie Crocker’s WBLS, which expanded its programming to “include an unobtrusive mix of new music derived from other cultural sources,” including artists whose music Crocker thought “transcend[ed] the color of the skin.”<sup>53</sup> His choice of music corresponded to an idealized audience comprising college-educated middle-class adults of all races and ethnicities. George notes that, though Crocker’s audience base at WBLS was Black, these listeners were “hardly his primary concern,” a philosophy highlighted in the station’s mid-1970s rebranding from “The Total Black Experience in Sound” to “The Total Experience in Sound” and its advertisements featuring beautiful white women a few years later.<sup>54</sup>

It wasn't just the music that differentiated WBLS and other Urban stations from Black stations: their presentations—their *stationalities*—differed as well. Urban stations often employed DJs who they hoped would connect with a multiracial audience. These DJs, white and Black alike, took “a more mass[-]appeal approach in their on-air presentations” than those on Black stations, departing from the more identifiably Black presentation styles used by DJs of previous generations that have been cited as precursors to rappers' flow.<sup>55</sup> Urban radio personnel hoped that these “smoother personality presentations” would appeal to middle-class, older, and non-Black demographics.<sup>56</sup> In so doing, these stations embraced the *politics of respectability*, a term initially coined by scholar Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham to describe racial-uplift strategies employed by Black women in the early twentieth century that has since been used to describe ways that minority communities counter negative racial stereotypes by aligning their behavior with white, middle-class, mainstream norms.<sup>57</sup>

For focusing on their role as a “business enterprise,” in the words of one programmer, Urban stations were regularly criticized for ignoring Black communities.<sup>58</sup> At a musical level, their sound, as critic Chuck Eddy wrote in 1985, “implied a socioeconomic progress that doesn't exist in real life.”<sup>59</sup> And by playing music by white artists, these stations took away airtime previously allocated for Black ones. More broadly, while Urban stations often claimed that their stations voiced the concerns of local Black listeners, the economics of Urban radio made doing so nearly impossible; by focusing on middle-class and older Black audiences, these stations could not represent the diversity of Black experiences in the United States. As Black stations turned into Urban ones they often failed to advocate for the entirety of their local Black communities, precluded by the financial constraints inherent to this format change.

As radio stations changed their nomenclature, so too did the music trade charts. Back in 1982, in the seventh-such name change since the chart's inception in 1942, *Billboard* had renamed the “Hot Soul Singles” chart as the “Hot Black Singles” chart to respond to the rise of disco and funk, genres which weren't immediately recognizable as soul.<sup>60</sup> But as radio stations began shying away from using Black as a format descriptor, and as the use of the word itself was called into question by activists like the Reverend Jesse Jackson (who encouraged the use of the term African American), the name of the chart was once again up for debate.<sup>61</sup> In 1986, Nelson George justified the chart's name by arguing that, while the term might be offensive to some, “Black” proudly reflected the racial makeup of the artists on the chart and the consumers who listened to their music, as well as the racist realities of the world around them.<sup>62</sup> Six months later, competitor *Radio & Records* changed the name of their corresponding chart to Urban, noting that this name highlighted that working in the Urban radio industry was a choice, not a racially predetermined appointment.<sup>63</sup> *Billboard* didn't adopt a name change until three years later, after George had left his post as the editor of the Black music section

and after the magazine published a letter to the editor claiming that “*Billboard* itself is partly responsible for the racism that still pervades the record business, and it will continue to be fostered until you change the name of your black chart to R&B (or something else).”<sup>64</sup> A little over six months later, the editors of *Billboard* changed the chart name to “Hot R&B Singles,” writing that although “there is no consensus against the use of the term ‘black music,’ it is apparent that, for many, it is becoming less acceptable to identify music in racial terms.”<sup>65</sup>

While Terri Rossi, the editor of what were now the *Billboard* R&B charts, wrote that “of all the events of 1990, the most important for me was the name change,” the impact of the format change from Black to Urban could be more clearly seen in who actually got paid.<sup>66</sup> This transition decreased the economic power of some Black radio professionals as the mostly white owners and operators of Urban stations used Black musicians’ popularity to finance their stations and hire non-Black employees.<sup>67</sup> Industry commentator and legendary Black DJ Jack “the Rapper” Gibson, a frequent critic of white involvement in Black-Oriented stations, often encouraged readers of his *Jack the Rapper* newsletter to fight back against these inequitable practices, asking them to, for example, protest the hiring of white programmers and consultants at Black-Oriented stations.<sup>68</sup> But Gibson didn’t just target white music-industry professionals; he also directed criticism at the Black professionals who were “justifying the rape of our music and culture.”<sup>69</sup> Overall, while larger audiences might have increased individual stations’ profits, they did little to improve working conditions for most Black music industry professionals. Perhaps, as Nelson George posits, “a more committed effort at self-sufficiency, in politics and economics, would have given (and still might give) blacks a better base from which to work for integration and practical power.”<sup>70</sup>

But self-sufficiency and diverse representation be damned: Urban stations won out. The financial model of the industry incentivized minimizing radio’s vital form of community connection to cater to already-well-catered-to white audiences.<sup>71</sup> Given the chance to advertise on an Urban station or a Black station, many national companies found it easier to align with a station that didn’t overtly advertise the race of its audience. This reality, together with the well-publicized success of stations that had switched from Black to Urban, encouraged many to change formatting; by the end of the 1980s, over two-thirds of Black-Oriented stations referred to themselves as Urban, up from 22 percent in 1983.<sup>72</sup>

### “TOO BLACK”

At the same time that Sugar Hill Records was recording the sounds of Black youth rapping, Black-Oriented radio stations were losing interest in that very demographic. When questioned, some programmers provided sonic reasons for not playing rap very often—it was music, after all. For example, one Black programmer who described the genre as “inherently redundant” thought that rap songs

didn't warrant repeat plays, asking "Who wants to sit in their living room and listen to rap records on the radio, anyway?"<sup>73</sup> Rap labels' own descriptions of the music, occasionally, didn't help: Def Jam cofounder Rick Rubin bragged in 1985 that his label, for example, "put out the *worst* records, records that other labels would not wanna put out. No radio stations will play them for the most part . . . This is the least commercial, most progressive form of rap . . . that the real audience wants to hear most."<sup>74</sup> However well-targeted these records were for rap's record-buying audience, characterizing them as "the least commercial" version of rap surely didn't help get airplay on commercial stations.

Furthermore, the genre quickly developed an undeserved reputation for sexual or profane lyrics.<sup>75</sup> For Black-Oriented programmers worried about violating the FCC's indecency policy, this general reputation for objectionable lyrical content could be enough to keep them from playing a song that had not been carefully vetted. Rap's reputation also dissuaded those programmers invested in the politics of respectability from playing a style of music reputed to align with such a common racist stereotype of Black culture. As respectability politics depends upon the existence of a "shameful other" to juxtapose against a more "respectable" group, rap may have gained this reputation in part to create such a distinction.<sup>76</sup> Urban programmers' stance against rap thus helped define their stations as more proximate to the white mainstream.

But more compelling were the economic reasons for stations' reluctance to play rap. Beholden to their sales departments, programmers needed to play music that appealed to more profitable older audiences. Rap, as they understood it, did anything but that. In Def Jam cofounder Russell Simmons's experience, stations "justify keeping rap off the air by insisting that it's simply a matter of demographics—that rap appeals to a listenership that's too young and that doesn't have enough money to buy the big ticket items, and that therefore companies selling cars and fur coats and whatever won't advertise on stations that play rap."<sup>77</sup> Shifting to an Urban format intensified the pressure for many stations to deliver older audiences for advertisers, and some programmers flatly refused to even try courting young listeners.<sup>78</sup> One operations manager of an Urban station aimed at adults railed against playing rap and other dance records, wondering why "many black adults over the age of 25 have to endure music they don't particularly care for?"<sup>79</sup> The generational antagonism may well have been mutual; Simmons's Def Jam colleague Bill Stephney claimed that rap was "not just a 'Fuck you' to white society, it was a 'Fuck you' to the previous black generation as well."<sup>80</sup> Even so, the attitude of rappers toward an older Black generation was hardly the determining factor. The power of exposure lay in the hands of Black-Oriented programmers who were actively seeking profitable listeners.

But Urban stations' failure to play rap was about more than the actual socioeconomic status of rap's fans. One of the most common assumptions about race in the United States is that it aligns with class. Due in no uncertain way to the

centuries-long legacy of legalized inequality, race, as scholar Patricia Hill Collins writes, “intersects with class to such a degree in the United States that race often stands as proxy for class.”<sup>81</sup> Drawing attention to this relation, Simmons deemed some Black-Oriented programmers’ hesitancy towards rap “racist” because they “just don’t like black street music.”<sup>82</sup> While the day-to-day lives of upwardly mobile Black radio professionals may have confounded the grossly oversimplified alignment of race and class, this association also dictated many of their business models—it had made the transformation from Black to Urban worth thinking about.

This conflation also influenced their perspective toward rap. While the genre was made by and for an ethnically and racially diverse group of people, making it perhaps a good fit for Urban stations working to attract a multiracial audience, rap was considered anathema to the upwardly mobile, middle-class, urbane sophistication that these stations were trying to convey.<sup>83</sup> Programmers, whose jobs depended on cultivating profitable audiences, needed to demonstrate the financial capacity of their Black listeners despite oversimplified mainstream assumptions about the relationship between race and class. One way to do that was through embracing respectability politics, adopting white mainstream behaviors to signal class distinction and juxtaposing these behaviors against others’ assumed unwillingness to act appropriately (thereby denying their own entry to the supposedly equal post—civil rights market economy).<sup>84</sup> For Urban stations, rap could be this “other,” as it voiced the concerns of Black youth disproportionately affected by systemic inequality and a lack of social mobility, structural barriers all too easily cast as behavioral ones by those hoping to distinguish themselves through the politics of respectability. The concern about the age and socioeconomic class of rap’s audience was in part a smokescreen for concerns about the type of Black identity that rap represented. Rap, as Simmons claimed, reminded Black adults “of the corner, and they want to be as far away from that as they [could] be.”<sup>85</sup> “Too black” didn’t just say something about race; it said something about economics. Rap’s audiences weren’t valuable.

#### URBAN STATIONS’ CROSSOVER SOUND

But rap’s absence from radio wasn’t just about demographics. For radio programmers, generating specific types of audiences meant playing certain types of music. Fully understanding Black-Oriented radio’s reluctance to play rap requires consideration not only of audiences but also of the music these audiences would have heard.

One of the reasons that Urban stations found success in the 1980s was that record companies were putting out lots of music that appealed to the broad, aspirationally middle-class audiences these stations were trying to attract. As noted earlier, major labels began investing in Black-music-focused record divisions during the 1970s and 1980s, but in many cases they considered the Black consumer

market quite limited. Clive Davis of Arista Records, for example, thought that Black artists could not recoup recording costs without appealing to a non-Black audience.<sup>86</sup> Many record companies thus encouraged Black artists to maximize their potential audience and its associated profits by making music that appealed to multiple radio formats. Any given album release by a Black artist at PolyGram Records, for example, was designed to have “two or three cuts to cover the black base,” according to the label’s vice president of Black music A&R. The rest of the album would typically consist of songs the label hoped would “generate Michael Jackson, Lionel Richie[,] or Prince numbers”—music that crossed over to non-Black listeners—because “the industry [could] no longer deal with a narrow-minded mentality in making and marketing music.”<sup>87</sup> Black artists were expected to try for mainstream success.

So how did artists generate Lionel Richie numbers? One way that Richie himself crossed over was by collaborating with white artists who were already popular on other formats, creating duets that overtly signaled their broad appeal by combining their demographic-specific sounds and techniques.<sup>88</sup> In 1986, Richie used this crossover technique on “Deep River Woman,” a collaboration with white country band Alabama, who had recently crossed over to adult pop audiences. The song begins with a descending guitar run combining double stops and hammer-ons, lending the introduction a country sound aimed at Alabama’s core audience. But when Richie comes in with the chorus his supple voice smooths over Alabama’s twangy vocal harmony, creating a sound that is not quite country, not quite R&B. Instead, it’s crossover music, a calculated blending of genres intended to maximize audience reach.

Richie was hardly alone in recruiting artists of other races to help him cross over. In the early 1980s, white-oriented stations were particularly reluctant to play music by Black musicians in the wake of the infamous Disco Demolition Night and subsequent backlash by white audiences against disco and other Black styles, as well as the marginalized populations associated with these styles.<sup>89</sup> In 1980, Top 40 radio played less music by Black artists than in any year since 1968 and, two years later, *Radio & Records* reported that Top 40’s “resistance to playing black records” had climbed to “an all[-]time high.”<sup>90</sup> But when paired with a famous white musician, Black artists had a far easier crossover journey. For example, in 1982 and 1983, Paul McCartney lent his white industry privilege to Stevie Wonder and Michael Jackson, releasing three interracial duets that all peaked at number one or two on the *Billboard* “Hot 100” and in the top ten of the “Hot Black Singles” chart. These sorts of duets, one *Billboard* contributor wrote, were of “tremendous sociological, artistic and media significance” because they helped break down the racial barriers between radio formats.<sup>91</sup> And the floodgates opened. In 1984, Diana Ross and Julio Iglesias released “All of You,” and R&B singer James Ingram teamed up with country artist Kenny Rogers for “What About Me.” The next year brought “the ultimate crossover recording”: the blockbuster charity musical event “We Are

the World,” featuring the distinct vocal styles of Michael Jackson, Bruce Springsteen, Lionel Richie, Stevie Wonder, Cyndi Lauper, and Ray Charles, among many others, singing over a generic pop groove.<sup>92</sup>

Many of these crossover songs were ballads, a capacious musical form which granted multiple singers the space to show off their genre-specific vocal stylings. Ballads, furthermore, had a long history of facilitating crossover; music scholar David Metzger writes that Black artists in the 1950s crossed over to white female audiences via this “style that was familiar to white audiences and did not have strong African American resonances, the combination of which made the singers seem less off-putting and more approachable.”<sup>93</sup> By the mid-1980s, as one *Billboard* writer put it, ballads by Black artists were “safe” to play on many Top 40 stations.<sup>94</sup>

But even without the help of duet partners, most high-profile Black artists were expected to design songs to appeal across racial lines. The radio industry had a set procedure for crossing Black artists over: all songs by new Black artists and nearly all first singles from established Black performers’ albums were initially marketed towards Black listeners.<sup>95</sup> Only after these songs charted well with this core audience would labels consider marketing them more widely, a process that cheapened the industry role of Black radio audiences “to auditioning records geared to white audiences.”<sup>96</sup> This exclusionary practice helped reinforce the whiteness of the Top 40 mainstream. And for Black musicians, it demanded that they create two distinct styles of music, the “two or three cuts to cover the black base” and the music aimed toward a broader audience. Radio programmers and musicians were acutely sensitive to Black artists’ crossover moves, tracking the sonic modifications that major artists made as they crossed over. For example, one Black-Oriented radio programmer described Prince’s 1986 release “Kiss” as “the original Prince before he went for that big crossover appeal sound”; a Top 40 programmer, meanwhile, questioned how his format was going to deal with the song because it was “more like that old funky Prince than his rock or disco outings.”<sup>97</sup>

Like Prince, other Black artists accomplished this sort of demographic shape-shifting through stylistic modification, mixing musical elements typically aimed at Black audiences with the white-coded sounds of pop or rock. The A-side of Lionel Richie’s “Deep River Woman” did just that: “Ballerina Girl” sounds like any other soft-pop ballad of the mid-1980s with its sweeping string section, slight guitar syncopation, twinkling electric piano, and—importantly—not too much vocal ornamentation, which might have been heard as too Black.<sup>98</sup> Looking for the same multiracial audiences as these genre-blending songs were intended for, Urban stations embraced these crossover styles, creating a positive feedback loop in which Black artists were rewarded for creating music intended, at least in part, for white audiences.<sup>99</sup>

Regardless of—or, just as often, because of—their success, Black artists were criticized for acquiescing to these types of industry demands. One of the most

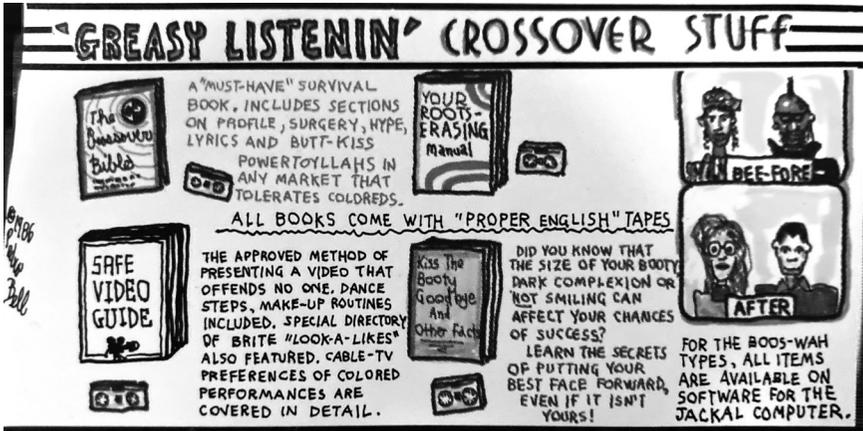


FIGURE 1. Detail, George Clinton, *R&B Skeletons in the Closet*, Capitol Records, 1986. Note the change in appearance in the before-and-after pictures.

scathing critiques of crossover music from this period appears as album artwork on George Clinton's 1986 album *R&B Skeletons in the Closet*, which mocks both the white music executives that rely on the marketing ideologies detailed above and the artists careerist or spineless enough to make music that denies their racial heritage. The back cover art, drawn by Clinton's go-to artist Pedro Bell, displays a book collection for Black musicians who want to cross over, including "Your Roots Erasing Manual" and "Kiss the Booty Goodbye and Other Facts" (figure 1). The results of paying attention to these books and the accompanying cassette tapes which teach "proper English" are found in a set of before-and-after pictures: after crossing over, the artists are shown with lighter skin and smoother hair, indicating that they have become less Black.

Critical assessments such as these fail to make space for artistic intention and autonomy, as scholar Jack Hamilton has argued, and do not fully account for the diversity of artists' lived experiences.<sup>100</sup> Responding to criticism that his music sounded too white, Lionel Richie stated in a 1987 *Ebony* cover story that he intentionally made music distinct from what some might consider authentic Black music, that he was trying "to break the stereotype that says to satisfy Black people you have to play something funky."<sup>101</sup> While Richie endured criticism for being one of those crossover singers who "get on their high horse and forget where they came from," Richie himself noted that his music represented his own complex identity, informed by being raised within the Tuskegee University community in Alabama: "For people to say I've left my roots [is] ridiculous. *These* are my roots."<sup>102</sup> Authenticity, however, wasn't the central concern of radio stations. Programmers, beholden to their station's business model, preferred artists whose self-representation fit within the bounds of what they thought a profitable audience would want to listen to.

Thanks in some part to its own roots in low-income minority urban neighborhoods, rap wasn't considered to have much crossover potential. As one Black record company employee put it, "You're not going to get on Johnny Carson doing hip-hop."<sup>103</sup> This attitude reduced major-label support for rappers in the early 1980s, but it didn't stop artists from making crossover rap. For example, Kurtis Blow worked his rap ballad "Daydreamin'" to Black-Oriented radio in 1983; his manager described the song as "part of the pop-rap mainstream," meaning that it could "fit on black radio formats easily."<sup>104</sup> But the problem for Black rappers was that in the early 1980s, record companies just as easily could—and would—look to white artists to make music in this "pop-rap mainstream."

#### ON THE OTHER SIDE

Over on the other side of the musical color line, white artists were also interested in creating music that blended the latest Black styles with genres more commonly associated with white performers. In the early 1980s, some white New York City musicians grew infatuated with hip hop, dabbling, incorporating, and appropriating various elements of the culture into their music.<sup>105</sup> Spurred by their initial interest in graffiti, other downtown Manhattan-based artists such as Charlie Ahearn and Fred Brathwaite invited MCs, visual artists, dancers, and DJs from the Bronx and other boroughs to perform at art gallery openings, rock clubs, and experimental venues. At these events, promoter Michael Holman claims, white impresarios like himself forced the four elements of what would come to be known as hip hop together; he and others were "toying with evolution," by creating a new culture out of these four distinct artistic activities.<sup>106</sup> While Black artists such as Afrika Bambaataa have made similar claims, Holman's assertion that white gatekeepers contrived a multidimensional artistic culture out of various activities created by Black and Latinx youth from the South Bronx highlights the considerable power that white stakeholders had, not only in these early-1980s moments but also in the following years as such narratives circulated.<sup>107</sup>

One of the first pieces of music from this uptown-downtown mingling to find radio play was Blondie's "Rapture," a glitzy disco reimagining of a sweat-filled hip hop party. In the song, Debbie Harry recites a memorably inane rap that, while paying tribute to hip hop icons Fab Five Freddy and Grandmaster Flash, centered its attention on a Martian eating just about anything that rhymed with the fourth planet from the sun, including bars, cars, and guitars.<sup>108</sup> In a rebuke to those who thought that disco was dead—instead it had merely rebranded as "dance music"—the song was a huge hit, topping the *Billboard* "Hot 100" in early 1981.

Radio's embrace of this song reveals how race-based programming decisions across formats informed rap's lack of airplay up to this point. Sylvia Robinson claimed that radio programmers, regardless of race, were more receptive to "Rapture" than to any of Sugar Hill Records' releases, pointing out that Blondie's

song started on at least three times more stations than one of Sugar Hill's releases might eventually be played on.<sup>109</sup> Robinson's friend Joe Medlin thought that Black-Oriented stations' receptivity towards "Rapture" indicated that programmers didn't object to rap records generally. Instead, they didn't "want to play no *black* 'rap' record."<sup>110</sup>

Debbie Harry seemed to have caught the rap bug: a few months after "Rapture" hit number one, Harry released her solo album *KooKoo*, which featured two songs with rapped vocals. The more popular of the two, "Backfired," was produced by Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards of Chic and ventured even closer to rap than "Rapture" had. Atop a funk-inspired groove Harry's vocals blur the lines between rap and sing-songy speech, and at two points in the song she more clearly embraces a rapped tone as she trades rhymes with a male vocalist. But this song failed to replicate the success of "Rapture," perhaps because of its abundant rapped vocals; discussing her use of "black idioms" on the album, *Billboard* concluded that "Harry may have waded into waters which are too deep for her."<sup>111</sup>

The waters were full of such waders. In the early 1980s, white artists such as Teena Marie, the Clash, Tom Tom Club, Wham!, and Falco all released songs with rapped vocals in them. Many of these artists were influenced by the genre-blending work of Afrika Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force, whose electro-defining hit "Planet Rock" combined funk and vocoder-rapped vocals with Kraftwerk-inspired synthesizer riffs to "appeal to the white crowd and still keep the sound that would appeal to the hip hoppers."<sup>112</sup> For example, "Buffalo Gals" by Malcolm McLaren "scratches and do-si-does at the same time" by combining a square-dance-caller rap (performed by McLaren and backed in a more traditional style on side B of the record) with a beat (programmed by producer Trevor Horn) and scratching (performed by the World's Famous Supreme Team).<sup>113</sup> According to Horn, the song originated when McLaren flew the World's Famous Supreme Team to England, where Horn began the session by asking them what their favorite beat was. After spending hours replicating the beat, he asked them to rap the lyrics to "Buffalo Gals," as performed by Peyote Pete on a Smithsonian Folkways recording. The group refused, saying "we can't do that—that's Ku Klux Klan shit. That's what the Ku Klux Klan dance to."<sup>114</sup> Seeming to brush this critique aside, Horn finished the track two weeks later after getting a rhythmically challenged McLaren to rap the lyrics. At its best, the song, in the words of McLaren, was "bringing various cultures together" on the dance floor by using sampling to accumulate culturally diverse sounds and scratching to glue these sounds together.<sup>115</sup> But at its worst it was exploitative, another example of a white man using music's so-called universality to steal musical material from those afforded less power.<sup>116</sup>

Many in the music industries were excited—and confounded—by these hip hop-inspired, genre-mashing songs. Due to the diversity of sounds integrated together, industry personnel referred to songs like McLaren's, as well as other genre-bending music that didn't quite sound like anything else, by the mind-bogglingly

vague title *new music*.<sup>117</sup> And they were impressed by the multiracial audience associated with the style. In the wake of the aforementioned death of disco, *Billboard's* dance music columnist Brian Chin was surprised to see “the rockers who established their own all-but-totally-segregated clubs to escape the black music of the time” interested in hip hop.<sup>118</sup> Black acts began touring new wave clubs, and “rock DJs,” Chin wrote, regularly “play[ed] an entire evening of Arthur Baker/Tommy Boy music to a crowd of the fashionably punk.” Because the fans of this scene and the music they listened to “refuse[d] to be logical or predictable,” he forecasted that “standards and formats [would] start crumbling.”<sup>119</sup> And they did, at least according to *Billboard's* rock columnist Rollye Bornstein, who thought that white musicians playing Black styles helped loosen Top 40 and Rock stations’ segregated programming by 1983.<sup>120</sup>

But that was after white artists became popular by appropriating rap, leaving little room for Black rappers to appear on the radio. As is clear from Trevor Horn ignoring the World’s Famous Supreme Team’s lyrical objections, Debbie Harry’s outsized success when compared to the careers of artists on Sugar Hill Records, and the control that white gatekeepers had during the early uptown/downtown exchanges, the optimistic possibilities of music which stirred together these Black and white influences failed to account for the legacy of structural racism in and outside of the music industries. For the most part, the people who made money and gained radio airplay from these cultural exchanges were white, even though the music had roots in Black musical styles.<sup>121</sup>

The record industry in the early 1980s thus presented two interlocking problems for Black rappers. First, many Black artists were being encouraged to make cross-over music that had supposed long-term appeal beyond a Black audience. In the early 1980s, rap was, by most appraisals, a dance craze considered unworthy of major label investment. Even as the genre proved more durable, major labels’ disinterest continued because, like Black-Oriented radio stations, major labels were interested in appealing to older Black audiences rather than rap’s younger audience, who they feared did not have sufficient disposable income to regularly purchase records. Second, white artists were taking up whatever space might have been given to rap and rap-adjacent sounds with new music styles. And white artists had a significant advantage; as one club DJ and record distributor noted, labels were often just “inherently against black music” because it made more financial sense for a major label to sign a white artist than a Black artist making a similar kind of music.<sup>122</sup>

Major labels’ feeble support of rap swayed Black-Oriented programmers’ opinions about the genre. Bobby Robinson, president of Enjoy Records, noticed that major labels’ initial reluctance “made a clear impact at many black-formatted stations” that “sabotage[d] rap’s momentum.”<sup>123</sup> And because rap had yet to establish its independence from dance and new music in the minds of many industry professionals, the genre competed for radio airplay with non-rap dance music

that radio programmers were often more willing to play, such as Michael Jackson's disco-inflected songs from *Thriller* and Prince's genre-bending hits. If rappers wanted to be played on Black-Oriented radio, they would need to overcome these hurdles.

### CRACKING THE CODE

One group that did exactly this was Whodini, who proved to be one of the most enduring rap groups of the mid-decade. Their first single was so explicitly aimed at Black-Oriented radio that it was, well, about the radio. In 1983, Whodini released a tribute to DJ Mr. Magic, who at the time hosted a New York City rap mix show called *Mr. Magic's Rap Attack*. In "Magic's Wand," rappers Ecstasy and Jalil narrate a history of rap, highlighting Mr. Magic's role in popularizing the genre in the Big Apple. Their lyrics are laid in over a groovy bass line, incidental noises that one might hear at a space-themed party, and, importantly, "the most innovative keyboard work heard on a street-oriented disk this year": synthesizer chords and a sinewy chorus melody performed by Thomas Dolby, whose new music hit "She Blinded Me With Science" had caught radio by surprise the previous year.<sup>124</sup> The single captured Whodini's stylistic flexibility; promotional copy noted its crossover potential by stating that the song "came sizzling up from the streets, raised the roof in the clubs, and now is conquering radio."<sup>125</sup>

"Magic's Wand" leapt through some of the hurdles the record industry presented. Whodini had roots in rap: they originated from the New York rap scene, and this song, produced and promoted by respected rap figures Larry Smith and Russell Simmons, soundtracked the most important rap mix show on the East Coast. But like other new music artists, Whodini also took rap and mixed it with other influences, exemplified by their collaboration with Dolby. What's more, the group recorded not for a prominent rap label such as Tommy Boy, Sugar Hill, or Profile, but instead for the British label Jive, which was distributed in the United States by major-label-affiliated Arista Records.

However, the song failed to enchant radio. It was a hit on Mr. Magic's station, but other stations in New York City refused to play it. While the program director at one Urban station claimed that he was reluctant to play the song because it was about a rival station (and the group should have "had the intelligence and foresight to have prepared versions for each station"), the reaction of another Urban programmer more clearly articulated Black-Oriented radio's resistance to rap, as he claimed that his station was not "going after the crowd that listens to that type of music."<sup>126</sup>

A few years later, however, Whodini successfully changed the makeup of the crowd who listened to "that type of music" by turning to the tried-and-true crossover vehicle of the ballad with their song "Friends." With a sung chorus, a hummable chord progression, and carefully enunciated lyrics, the song was,

according to an executive at Jive, “a very concerted effort to capture the older, sophisticated demographic and to open them up to rap.”<sup>127</sup> Producer Larry Smith echoed this sentiment, noting that since “rap’s not just for kids anymore,” he had tried to make the group sound “a bit more adult” as compared to his production work for groups like Run-D.M.C.<sup>128</sup> “Friends” offered programmers a version of rap that was closer to R&B; *Billboard* reported that the “universal sentiments and slicker production values” appealed to radio stations.<sup>129</sup> But the rhythm track for the song, notes Jalil, still retained rap’s hard-hitting feel by combining sounds from two drum machines for the first time. “When that shit dropped in the studio,” Jalil recalled, Smith asked him, “Do you realize how many cats are going to play us in the park for this sound right here?”<sup>130</sup> Combining these beats with adult-friendly melodic elements worked; the song spent twenty-three weeks on *Billboard*’s “Hot Black Singles” chart and peaked in the top five in December 1984.

#### “RAPPIN’ FOR EQUAL ACCESS”

But even with Whodini, Kurtis Blow, and Run-D.M.C. (who will be discussed in chapter 3) occasionally making their way onto Black-Oriented stations, this format did not play much rap in the early 1980s. Hearing rap on these stations was uncommon enough in 1985 that the first-ever trade chart devoted to the genre incorporated airplay from only ten stations across the country.<sup>131</sup> One notable exception could be found in Los Angeles, where AM station KDAY played a considerable amount of rap throughout the 1980s.<sup>132</sup> But in most other areas, the only place rap found a reliable home on the radio was on specialty mix shows programmed by a smattering of radio stations. These shows were mostly broadcast late at night on college radio stations, which were not beholden to the same financial pressures as commercial stations and, in the early 1980s, were developing a reputation for their free-form approach to programming styles of music marginalized by commercial broadcasting.<sup>133</sup> For instance, *Super Spectrum Mix Show*, whose DJs later formed Public Enemy, began broadcasting in 1982 from Long Island on WBAU, Adelphi University’s radio station.<sup>134</sup> Some commercial radio stations also broadcast mix shows as a way to fill less-popular programming slots and gain listeners at odd hours. Most famously, a year after enduring criticism for being unwilling to play rap, Frankie Crocker’s WBLS began broadcasting *Mr. Magic’s Rap Attack*, the mix show later soundtracked by Whodini.<sup>135</sup>

But these shows had only a scattered impact on the radio industry’s relationship with the genre. Despite their popularity, they rarely influenced a station’s programming during the rest of its broadcasting day. And by segregating rap airplay to off-hour specialty shows, these stations cast rap outside the realm of ordinary broadcasting; rap, according to these stations, was not music for their entire audience. What’s more, these shows were usually hosted by someone not on staff at the radio station and their playlists were rarely reported to trade journals, which

meant that playing rap records on these shows didn't affect the radio industry's informal and formal methods of charting hits. Even Los Angeles's KDAY, which played rap far more frequently and regularly than just during mix shows, had a limited impact on the local music industries because the station was only broadcast in AM and was difficult to tune in to from certain parts of the metro area.<sup>136</sup>

Russell Simmons of Def Jam knew that limited mix show exposure wasn't going to cut it. Simmons had witnessed the promise of commercial radio exposure with Run-D.M.C.'s "It's Like That," which saw sales explode from a thousand records per week to over three thousand per day when New York City stations started playing the record. "Radio play helps," he pointed out, maintaining that he "need[ed] it."<sup>137</sup> Other rap label owners agreed, and some considered signing distribution deals with major labels in the hope that this type of exposure might persuade Black-Oriented programmers to play their records.<sup>138</sup>

In 1985, Simmons and his artist management company RUSH Productions took out a nine-page advertising supplement in *Billboard*, presented as a series of articles, to celebrate the company's fifth anniversary.<sup>139</sup> While some articles were intended to help novices learn about the genre—such as one about the "First Authentic Rap Movie" and another directing readers to "What's Popular on the Street"—others portrayed rap as a genre with proven durability and investment potential. Indeed, some headlines in the section could have read as seminar notes on convincing the music industries about the potential longevity and commercial viability of a new genre: "Rush Says Rap, Like Rock, Is Here to Stay" and "It's More than Making Records, It's Building Careers." This sizeable special section not only demonstrated the success of Simmons's company but also revealed his aspiration to find a place for rap within the mainstream by pitching it to *Billboard's* non-specialized readership. The rap industry was figuring out how to sell itself, marketing the genre not just to those working in the Black sectors of the music industries but to everyone.

A few months later, Simmons continued his campaign, penning a *Billboard* editorial aimed specifically at radio programmers. Hoping to convince programmers across the dial of the promise and utility of playing rap, his "Rappin' for Equal Access to Radio" acknowledges the distinct programming struggles inherent to different formats by addressing Black-Oriented, Top 40, and Rock programmers separately. He pleads with Black-Oriented programmers not to "ghetto-ize rap," to acknowledge that young adults like rap, and to treat rap as they would any other genre by not forcing each rap song to compete with all other rap songs for a few spots on their playlists. He asks Top 40 radio programmers not to treat rap artists as novelties, as doing so would be "racism, pure and simple." And he prompts Rock radio programmers to think back to the golden age of rock 'n' roll, when Black and white artists were heard on the same stations, and suggests that programmers maintaining a "de facto apartheid" by not playing Black artists should "close [their] eyes to differences in color, and open them to similarities in music and overall audience appeal."<sup>140</sup>

While Simmons's diagnosis of the problems rap encountered on each of these formats—ageism, racism, and racism, respectively—was correct, there was virtually no way his entreaty would work, for one simple reason: it ignored how the radio industry normally operated. In order for Top 40 and Rock stations to even consider playing a rap record by a Black artist, the rap record first had to gain airplay on Black-Oriented stations.<sup>141</sup> And as long as these stations mostly restricted rap songs to off-hour mix shows, the industry would not register the genre's popularity and these songs would not have the chance to make an impact on other formats.

This attitude towards crossover records wasn't limited to radio professionals; record labels assumed the same process.<sup>142</sup> In 1985, *Billboard* interviewed eleven major label executives and all but one made clear that, regardless of white audiences' growing interest in music by Black artists, their labels still planned to promote Black artists to Black-Oriented radio stations before attempting to cross them over. For example, while one executive optimistically thought that "the industry is ready to open up," they conceded that they still "wait for a record to go top 10 on the black charts before crossing it over."<sup>143</sup> Without a substantial shift in the structure of the radio industry, Black-Oriented radio's reluctance to play rap precluded the genre's presence on other formats.

Meanwhile, rap's absence from Black-Oriented radio continued.<sup>144</sup> By 1987, Nelson George described a "generation gap in black music" developing between a younger generation, who adored rap and identified with it more than classic R&B styles, and an older group of more influential music industry personnel, who "should know better but don't" and were "nostalgic for the days of 'good music' and expectant (even hopeful) that one day soon hip-hopping and scratching will all disappear."<sup>145</sup> But as we well know, hip-hopping and scratching did not disappear, not even on the radio. For, while Black-Oriented radio would continue to eschew rap, other changes in the radio industry ensured its rise.