

STRAIGHT LOVE, NO CHASER: AUTHENTICITY AND THE SOUL MUSIC REVIVAL

BY

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ABSTRACT

This project explores the revived interest in American soul music and the ways that contemporary soul musicians negotiate the concept of “authenticity.” Two contemporary record labels, Daptone Records and Numero Group, have spearheaded this revival. As I argue, their ascendance is symptomatic of larger, more sweeping concerns; a response to something lost that needs to be reclaimed, or something underrepresented that needs to be represented. For these reasons, I view Daptone and Numero Group as instructive case studies in the analysis of authenticity as a term of separation, distinction, acclaim, and prestige. Further, articulations of authenticity define the terms under which these disputations are fought. They illuminate soul music’s contentious relationship with its past and explain its enduring relevance in the present—a relevance necessarily wrought with assumptions about what types of ethical commitments from the past are worth reclaiming and preserving.

This dissertation aims to reveal Daptone’s and Numero Group’s ethical commitments, showing them to be disciplined by the selective uptake of certain sonic qualities, attitudinal dispositions, and aspirational goals that critique popular music aesthetics. Contestations of authenticity appear both in the ways that these two record labels perceive and interpret the legacy of soul music in the 1960s and 1970s and in the affective and sonic qualities that they champion in doing so. I argue that the term “authenticity” be foregrounded in rhetorical scholarship as a primary object of concern. More importantly, however, I also argue that the story of American soul music is a particularly fertile site from which scholars in communication can reassess their understandings of how aesthetic values become authenticated through time.

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Chapter 1: An Introduction to Authenticity and Soul

On an unassuming block in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn sits the House of Soul, the no-frills epicenter of contemporary soul music. The building at 115 Troutman is home to Daptone Records, a label founded by Gabriel Roth and Neal Sugarman in 2002. The House of Soul building looks like a prototypical illustration of urban neglect. Its structure appears to be in the advanced stages of disrepair, its brick exterior sometimes adorned with splatters of graffiti. It hardly looks like the sort of place where Grammy Award winning music is made or platinum-selling records are produced. However, against conventional wisdom and in the face of critics who see it as anachronistic, the House of Soul and its Daptone label has remained one of the most profitable independent record labels in the country (Perry, 2012). The label's marquee band, Sharon Jones & the Dap-Kings, have filled theaters across the world, sold over 100,000 records, and been credited with popularizing a vintage sound that has been a reference point for musicians across genres (Dayal, 2011). Artists like Adele, John Legend, Corinne Bailey Rae, and the late Amy Winehouse, who recorded her Grammy-award winning album *Back to Black* at the House of Soul with members of the Dap-Kings, have all been influenced heavily by this vintage soul music (Dayal, 2011, Knafo, 2008).

In a long feature article in the *New Yorker*, Sasha Frere-Jones (2010) writes that "Daptone has become central to this soul revival" and that their adherence to the recording techniques of James Brown and Otis Redding are fundamental to the revived interest in soul music. As Frere-Jones argues, "The Dap-Kings are one of a growing number of acts that draw from the music of the sixties and seventies with great fidelity." Besides adhering to the stylistic expectations of 1960s soul music, Daptone has also maintained a commitment to the vinyl

medium and has contributed to an influx in vinyl music purchasing. All of this is to suggest that Daptone's emergence is reflective of cultural trends in music that stretch beyond its own singular influence. Soul music historian Craig Werner even commented that contemporary music is so awash in retro sounds that "no matter which vector you're following, you're winding up with soul music" (Friskics-Warren, 2007).

To some, Daptone's ascendance seems unlikely, against convention, and confounding. As Saki Knafo of the *New York Times* noted in a 2008 feature story, "a decade ago, few people could have anticipated that an outfit of meticulous soul revivalists with an astonishingly energetic, smack-talking, 4-foot-11 middle-aged black woman for a lead singer would become of one of the more celebrated indie acts in the country." Nevertheless, critics have been mostly praiseworthy, albeit with some skepticism about the Dap-Kings' strict adherence to working in musical styles long thought relegated to distant memory. Some, like the *Village Voice's* John Caramanica (2008), have even used Baudrillardian terms in describing Jones' music as "too committed to simulacra," and *NPR's* Ann Powers (2011) skeptically wondered what it might mean to "keep it real" in the midst of this unexpected interest in soul music.

Boston Globe music critic Siddhartha Mitter has been the most critical. In a concert review he argued that "an odor of exploitation hovered in the room," while pointing out that the audience was "young, self-conscious, and overwhelmingly white" (Mitter, 2005). In a later radio interview on WNYC, Mitter explained that "original" soul music was "race music. A music of struggle" that took place in a specific context (Schaefer, 2010). "I worry about the separation between that context and an appreciation that a whole new audience has for it [soul music] now," Mitter argued. Similarly, a feature article in the *Chicago Reader* carried this headline: "Does

Sharon Jones Need to Care that Her Audience is Full of White Hipsters?” (Henderson, 2010).

For these reasons, the Daptone label and Sharon Jones find themselves not only being celebrated for their independent spirit, but also continuously having to explain their adherence to a style of music that seems problematically out-of-context. All the while, the musicians themselves scoff and bristle at such suggestions, passing them off as manufactured controversies that only surface in interviews with journalists (Henderson, 2010). Through the controversies, Daptone has remained committed to its principles and resistant to accusations that they are obstinate fetishists of a bygone era.

In addition to these new artists operating in retro-soul styles, there has been a corresponding rise in long-forgotten performers who have revived their careers thanks to this renewed interest. As soul music historian Bill Friskies-Warren wrote, recent years have been marked by a “re-emergence of a number of singers who first made their mark during soul’s heyday in the 1960s” (Friskies-Warren, 2007). These performers, like Bettye LaVette, Solomon Burke, Irma Thomas, Syl Johnson, Charles Bradley, and Howard Tate, have been the primary benefactors of this revival. Chicago’s Numero Group archival record label has also positioned itself as a chief contributor to this renewed interest in long-forgotten soul musicians. A recent profile in *Spin Magazine* even proclaimed Numero Group the “world’s greatest reissue label” (Peisner, 2012). The fact that Numero Group is profitable in an era that has seen record sales drop 41 percent over the last decade has flummoxed even astute observers of music business trends (McDonald, 2012). The label’s sterling reputation among their clientele has produced a bevy of repeat customers. As Jason Ankeny of *Entrepreneur Magazine* recalls, “Numero’s commitment to quality is so much a given among the music-buying cognoscenti that many sign up as label subscribers, forking over \$100 each to reserve copies of all new Numero releases that

will appear within the calendar year to come—even if the details of those projects remain unknown to the public” (Ankeny, 2011). Further, Numero spends almost no money on traditional marketing efforts and has “prospered almost solely by word of mouth” (McDonald, 2012). The word-of-mouth marketing efforts and subscription service place the emphasis on the consumer to seek out Numero Group, assuring an audience of in-the-know connoisseurs. Ankeny states that Numero’s target audience are those collectors who value “entertainment and education” in equal parts. The appeal has certainly resonated, as Numero Group, like Daptone, has managed to be one of the few profitable record labels in the country (McDonald, 2012).

So what exactly accounts for all of this renewed interest in soul music? Commentators and critics have located Daptone and Numero Group as spearheading the revival, but they seem less secure in their diagnosis of the reasons why. Nevertheless, there is one recurring perception that seems to tie so many of these commentaries together. Daptone and Numero Group are perceived to be *authentic*. As a 2014 review in *Under the Radar Magazine* states, Daptone’s music over the past decade has been “crafted with such acuity and authenticity, it almost demanded elevation to the status of ‘instant classic’” (Fenwick, 2014). In fact, in a frequently circulated story, critic Jon Dawson states that “an early Sharon Jones single that was issued on vinyl was so authentic sounding, collectors thought it was a long lost r&b gem” (Dawson, 2014).

These claims to authenticity are often steeped in nostalgia, even if those feeling nostalgic were not even alive during soul music’s zenith. “I think people want that again [a good way of life]. Authenticity is making a real comeback, and it's obvious that people are interested in talent,” stated Tim Sampson, spokesperson for the Stax American Soul Music, to *The Economist* (G.M., 2012). In the *The New York Times*, Craig Werner argued that “people want something

that sounds authentic, which I think to them means something that's not being designed, something that's not being distanced by advertising images or forced into a mode" (Friskies-Warren, 2007). The appeal to authenticity has reached an audience much younger than might be expected for a style of music over 45 years past its commercial peak. In a profile on the soul music revival, Raj Dayal of *The Atlantic* quoted Terry Currier, manager of the independent record store Music Millennium, who noted this trend: "Not only are new bands playing '60s-era soul, but there are a lot of reissue labels like Light in the Attic Records and archival label Numero opening their vaults ... and there is now a big interest, especially among younger people who maybe have never listened to this music before" (Dayal, 2011). Syl Johnson, an aging soul singer who revived his career thanks to a Numero Group box-set reissue, has stated in multiple interviews that his perceived authenticity is why he has found a younger audience. This is a point he made in a 2011 *IndyWeek* article: "They're [the audience] young. They got ears. For me to come and be authentic, because there ain't nobody to listen to who's authentic, so they can come and listen to one of the originals sing the shit" (Jarnow, 2011).

As these news stories suggest, Daptone and Numero Group's prominence seems to be symptomatic of larger, more sweeping concerns; a response to something lost that needs to be reclaimed, or something underrepresented that needs to be represented. For these reasons, I view Daptone and Numero Group as instructive case studies in the analysis of authenticity as a term of separation, distinction, acclaim, and prestige. Further, articulations of authenticity define the terms under which these disputations are fought. They illuminate soul music's contentious relationship with its past and explain its enduring relevance in the present—a relevance necessarily wrought with assumptions about what types of ethical commitments from the past are worth reclaiming and preserving. This dissertation aims to reveal Daptone's and Numero

Group's ethical commitments, showing them to be disciplined by the selective uptake of certain sonic qualities, attitudinal dispositions, and aspirational goals that critique popular music aesthetics. Contestations of authenticity appear both in the ways that these two record labels perceive and interpret the legacy of soul music in the 1960s and 1970s and in the affective and sonic qualities that they champion in doing so.

Most importantly, the ascendance of these two labels is symptomatic of underlying anxieties about what counts as "progress" in contemporary music and what ideals are to be championed in determining this progress. They express these ethical ideals through aesthetics and style, recording techniques, choices of medium, and in their own words—words that are often strident, self-congratulatory, and provocative in tone. Both Daptone and Numero Group offer their ideals as remedies for a host of maladies. These include the perceived degradation of popular music aesthetics, the compromising of integrity in the artistic process, and the misapplication of technology to art. They see popular music as dominated by airbrushed artists making auto-tuned music scrubbed of impurities and devoid of the spontaneity that characterizes the authentic and soulful. Daptone and Numero position themselves, and are positioned by others, as upholding integrity and authenticity by deliberately making music that sounds *out* of time (in the case of Daptone) or by reissuing music from "authentic" artists lost *through* time (in the case of Numero Group). As such, both can and have been accused of being inherently conservative, as seeing markers of progress only in the ideals of the past, and for rigidly adhering to traditions and contexts that are inappropriately matched to contemporary circumstances. With this in mind, I am chiefly concerned with the following questions in this dissertation: What do Daptone's and Numero Group's ethical ideals tell us about notions of musical, social, and racial progress? Are these ideals hopeful? Are they too conservative and is their romanticization of the

past self-defeating? And most importantly, what do they tell us about what counts for the “authentic” in contemporary popular music?

Answering these questions first requires us to reclaim the term “authenticity” as having scholarly merit given that these claims to authenticity are being made in a larger cultural and scholarly context that is hostile to the notion of authenticity, even outwardly dismissive of its utility as an objective indicator of social value or as a reliable metric of self-worth. This dismissal has manifested itself both in the popular presses (Andrew Potter’s blistering *The Authenticity Hoax: Why the ‘Real’ Things We Seek Don’t Make Us Happy*; Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor’s *Faking It: The Quest For Authenticity in Popular Music*, and most recently, Simon Feldman’s *Against Authenticity: Why You Shouldn’t Be Yourself*), and among academic theorists. Rather than seeing authenticity as a normative, achievable ideal with observable characteristic behaviors, academic theorists, such as Lawrence Grossberg, point to postmodern theories of selfhood and performance as evidence of the irrelevance of authenticity as a critical concept with any grounding in objective normative judgments (Grossberg, 1992). Music sociologists such as David Grazian (2003) suggest that authenticity is a “collectively produced fiction” and that the “search for authenticity is always a failing prospect” (p. 11). Using country music as his case study, Richard Peterson (1997) likewise suggests that authenticity is a shrewd fabrication, while soul music historian Brian Ward (1998) argues vociferously against the idea of an authentic, undiluted soul music sound. The work of these scholars correctly identifies authenticity as a socially-constructed term, but these accounts hardly view authenticity as retaining no social value. As Grazian argues, “although it remains a figment of our collective imagination, we still continue to employ the concept of authenticity as an organizing principle

for evaluating our experiences in everyday life, and that makes it significantly meaningful and, in many ways, *real*” (p. 16, his emphasis).

In this sense, I assume the claims to authenticity attached to both Daptone and Numero Group operate as a *real* standard of judgment, a way of communicating worth, as a mode of understanding through which certain values are preferred over others. This is what makes authenticity and its associations such a valuable concept for rhetorical studies. Moreover, the dismissal of authenticity as an objective concept with irrefutable characteristics should hardly preclude its utility as an evaluative concept with important political, ethical, and social implications. As noted sociologist Simon Frith (1996) argues, determinations of authenticity in music are often justified through moral language and used to judge “perceived quality of sincerity and commitment” (p. 71). Besides ethical justifications, claims to authenticity also are responsive to shifting political contexts, often taking their cues from power brokers interested in either obscuring or illuminating certain understandings of authenticity. Speaking to the importance of the politics of authenticity, Richard Peterson (1997) suggests that “the changing meaning of authenticity is not random, but is renegotiated in a continual political struggle in which the goal of each contending interest is to naturalize a particular construction of authenticity” (p. 220). It is for these reasons that I judge the claims to authenticity attached to Daptone and Numero Group as hardly accidental or unprovoked.

The scenes of American soul music examined in this dissertation suggest authenticity is rich in ambiguity and resistant to being authoritatively rendered. This is an ambiguity that most certainly contributes to its position as a feature of discourse that often appears unresolved. Authenticity is an anxious term. Those who celebrate the “true” and the “real” often accompany

their words with actions, postures, and dispositions triggered by hazy memories and nostalgic longing. This triggering, especially in the history of soul music, takes its cues from cultural trends, habits of consumption, and narratives of remembrance that must contend with the racial politics of a bygone era while still reacting to the immediacy of the contemporary moment. This tension within the past and present in soul music adds to the unease and the unresolvedness of authenticity as a term that can be easily apprehended or accounted for. If authenticity is an anxious term, as I argue, rhetorical scholars might view these tensions in soul music as instructive in building a fuller appreciation for how musicians encounter and respond to the obligations of their musical predecessors. Most important for scholars of communication, the words and actions of “authentic” soul musicians are announced through choices of style, and they are circulated through stories and imaginations about people, places, and sounds. In other words, they are specific rhetorical choices communicated and manipulated to achieve specific understandings and meanings.

My most fundamental suggestion, therefore, is that the term be foregrounded in rhetorical scholarship as a primary object of concern. More importantly, however, I also argue that the story of American soul music is a particularly fertile site from which scholars in communication can reassess their understandings of how aesthetic values become authenticated through time. Narratives of authenticity within the legacy of American soul music have sometimes been rendered with strokes so broad that they obscure much subtlety and nuance. They make troubling appeals to racial purity; they have difficulty assessing the role of interracial collaboration; they make essentializing arguments about “authentic” audiences; and they burden contemporary performers with sometimes unrealistic demands. In the following chapters I argue that these narratives condition responses from contemporary performers and record label owners that

occasion a variety of illuminating responses. As I reveal, sometimes these responses suggest a posture of defiance, of a refusal to bend to a culture perceived to be spoiled and debased. Its critique is communicated through strict adherence to the requirements of soul music's most luminous figures. Other times, it ushers in a troubling racial paternalism that uses the legacy of soul music as a site from which authenticity can only be experienced vicariously. It is a hopeless and fleetingly absorbed type of "authentic" experience—a tacit acknowledgment of authenticity's finite resources. As this dissertation reveals, appeals to authenticity in contemporary soul music are deployed by studious preservationists, subversive provocateurs, and modest traditionalists alike. Sometimes the same person tries on all of these identities simultaneously, strategically manipulating them to conform to the expectations of the moment, audience, and environment. For these reasons, I expect this dissertation might provoke more questions than it resolves—a reflection of the notoriously indeterminate nature of authenticity and its always shifting subjects.

In provoking these questions and arguments, and in framing the chapters to come, I first lay out some assumptions about authenticity as a scholarly academic concept; second, I describe the interdisciplinary connections between authenticity, popular music and sound; and finally I conclude with a preview of the chapters to come. In the following section I describe and critique some of the foundational assumptions about authenticity as a scholarly concept and offer my own ways of extending its utility.

Assumptions About Authenticity

The study of authenticity has appeared in several different disciplinary contexts, but the lack of clarity with which the term is deployed has remained a persistent stumbling block in

these investigations. Most problematically, too many of these analyses rely on assumptions about how authenticity functions without ever revealing the historical roots of the ideals and qualities that inform those assumptions. This oversight becomes especially noticeable when those historical roots become the reference points for contemporary articulations of authenticity, as is the case with Daptone and Numero Group. In previous scholarship, authenticity is simply “read into” a practice, leaving other scholars to derive the ideals that inform that reading. Broadly, the purpose of this dissertation is to provide a more forthcoming and inclusive analysis of the assumptions that guide the ideal of authenticity given its stubbornness as a term from which evaluative judgments are made. Moreover, if authenticity is taken to be “real” as a social fact, then scholarship must do more than simply document its social constructedness and certify its lack of objectively rendered characteristics. Efforts such as those undertaken by David Grazian, Michael Mario Albrecht (2008), Stephen King (2006) and Richard Peterson (1997) painstakingly reveal authenticity’s fabrication with regard to music, but too often the analysis stops at this stage.

Exposing authenticity’s manufactured and inconsistent nature, describing the qualities of its performance, detailing the futility of the search for it—these are all worthwhile critical endeavors, and these scholars have succeeded admirably in pursuing and documenting them with considerable insight. However, at this point I think it is necessary to do more than this. For example, I could certainly write a chapter in this dissertation detailing how some of Daptone’s aesthetic preferences for spontaneity and sloppiness—characteristics they consider indicators of authentic soul music—are at odds with the recording methods used by many of their “authentic” heroes; however, what exactly would this accomplish? That Daptone is wrong in their assumptions, that they are fabricating authenticity? What is much more interesting, I argue, is to

explain what is at stake in selecting these specific indicators as markers of authenticity and, further, to reveal what felt cultural need or sense of loss might be responsible for these artists making these choices about their art. In other words, I take these conceptions of authenticity as real and move beyond fixations with their historical fidelity or fabricated composition.

A remarkably modest, yet imperative insight by Simon Frith (1996) is instructive in expanding on these thoughts. Frith argues, quite simply, that “we need concepts of good and bad music” because they are the ways in which “we establish our place in various music worlds and use music as a source of identity” (p. 72). Frith realizes such claims about authenticity and taste are subjective, but he argues that in ignoring them one also ignores that critical judgments are based on feelings that are real and not just discursive (p. 73). To argue that authenticity is based on “myths and prejudices invented in the absence of actual experience,” as David Grazian does, is to dismiss the range of emotions that music elicits, from melancholic gloom to rapturous elation, as arrived at under false pretenses.

Along these lines, it is much more interesting and potentially illuminative, I assume, to absorb the contested nature of claims to authenticity made by actors in their own words. Such a methodological approach produces a more careful, inclusive analysis, as the claims of authenticity themselves become the objects of analysis. Such an approach gives a more palpable sense of how authenticity is felt, mediated, and rhetorically produced by those actually experiencing and contesting the authenticity of certain practices. Luckily, all of this recent work confirms authenticity as a salient topic within the study of rhetoric. However, its salience requires a firm grasp of the interdisciplinary contexts through which authenticity is best understood. Next, I describe these contexts.

Authenticity and Its Contexts

As I have noted, moments where authenticity is contested often reflect much broader apprehensions, making the study of authenticity an exciting and always regenerating site of critical inquiry. While the concept has retained critical utility across a number of different contexts, this project is principally concerned with viewing authenticity through the lens of popular music and sound studies. This specific interdisciplinary relationship has been troublingly undertheorized and remarkably insufficient in explicating how the nuances of sound and affect relate to musical histories. Further, my research suggests that this interdisciplinary relationship becomes easily observed and glaringly contested in moments that selectively revive artistic practices from the past and champion them as contemporary exemplars of authenticity. This is certainly the case with Daptone and Numero Group. These artistic practices clearly reflected the culture of the eras in which they were originally conceived, but their reemergence tells us a lot about how and why particular understandings of authenticity endure. It may seem too ambitious to try to stitch together so many sites of interdisciplinary inquiry, but as I show, these contexts all inform one another and blur together in ways that sometimes makes them indistinguishable. Neglecting one of them necessarily gives an incomplete picture of just how heavily implicated notions of authenticity are in the ascendance of Daptone and Numero Group Records.

With this in mind, the following pages of this chapter will provide a brief overview of the study of authenticity within the context of popular music and sound studies. Throughout this section I draw attention to both the theoretical insights that these scholars offer and some of the shortcomings that the forthcoming chapters will attempt to illuminate and overcome. I do this as a way of not only offering some disciplinary and theoretical points of reference, but to show how

this dissertation critiques those points of reference. In this way, I offer the forthcoming chapters as a way of detailing the implications of Daptone's and Numero Group's cultural prominence by also critiquing the theoretical assumptions that have guided discussion of the interdisciplinary relationship between authenticity, popular music, and sound studies.

Authenticity, Popular Music, and Sound

As might be expected, the study of authenticity in music has often been informed by scholars in performance studies. As I show in this section, often these scholars position authenticity as a term that can be easily manipulated in musical performance. Ever elusive, authenticity is shown to be a performative device used across musical genres for either commercial or artistic reasons. For example, in a study of performative authenticity for *Text & Performance Quarterly*, Mario Albrecht (2008) argues that “hipster” singer/songwriters like Ben Folds deftly employ postures of inauthenticity as a way of adding transparency to its performative structuration. Albrecht argues that the hipster “skillfully navigates ‘real’ and ‘artificial’ cultural practices with an awareness of the complicated relationship between the authentic and the inauthentic” (p. 388). In this way, Albrecht attributes particular types of agency to specific types of “authentic” artistic personas. For example, hip-hop performers like Dr. Dre are often beholden to authentically portraying the image of a “hard gangsta” in order to “reinforce their credibility as tough, masculine” representatives of the African-American communities of Long Beach and Compton (p. 382). On the other hand, bands like the Drive-By Truckers “are simultaneously acting the parts of ‘authentic’ southern rockers (‘doing’) as well as highlighting a specific performance of white southern-ness (‘showing doing’)” (p. 392). He ultimately concludes that bands like the Truckers “bring to the fore the impossibility of any truly

authentic performance, because the performance itself works to constitute that authenticity” (p. 392). Albrecht argues that “performance of ‘authenticity’ and the performance of ‘artifice’ are both performances,” while adding that this insight “destabilizes these distinctions” (p. 381). Vanderbilt sociologist Richard A. Peterson argues similarly that country music has always relied on “fabricating authenticity” by deploying media-constructed images of the “authentic hillbilly” or of the “singing cowboy” (pp. 67-94). These constructions enable performers the ability to “authenticate their claim to speak for the country identity” (p. 218).

In this sense, Peterson and Albrecht offer a well-established argument in suggesting that the media construct authenticity for commercial purposes. Albrecht and Peterson assert that there is no critical distinction separating “doing” and “showing doing.” At the very least, they are arguing that such distinctions have collapsed beyond recognition. Such an argument is consistent with Lawrence Grossberg’s (1992) suggestion that postmodernity is characterized by “ironic authenticity” in which musicians offer only “temporary investments” in their art (p. 227). In fact, these musicians, according to Grossberg, explicitly disavow seriousness and eschew sustained engagement with their music (p. 227). Part of the critical goal of this scholarship is to suggest the elusiveness and constructedness of authenticity while also endorsing the notion that postmodern musical performers are far less concerned with understandings of authenticity that privilege earnestness, commitment, or seriousness.

There are, however, a few examples of critical work that foregrounds audience, judgment, and the notion of authenticity as rooted in philosophic ideals. This scholarship offers a critique to the view posited by postmodernists like Grossberg. These critical endeavors attempt to prove the durability and nuance of authenticity as a critical concept. Grossberg (and Albrecht

for that matter) argue that trying to draw lines of demarcation between in and out groups, between hip and unhip music, or between mainstream and alternative culture practices is a futile exercise (pp. 225-227). However, Andrew Herman and John Sloop (1998) use Grossberg's evaluations as an entry point into a discussion of authenticity and judgment that features a prominent discussion of the ideal that undergirds contestations of the term. As Herman and Sloop ask, "If, as Grossberg claims, the logic of authenticity has given way to a logic of authentic inauthenticity, on what basis are judgments made in everyday life, if they are at all?" (p. 3). They choose the musical group Negativland as an object of study in detailing how the group's extensive use of sampling techniques seems incompatible with the Romantic ideal of authenticity that they champion. As a result, the group was forced to reimagine their authenticity as derived from the "free appropriation" of texts rather than one resulting from their own original music creations.

Other scholars have attempted to locate authenticity within the relationship between sound, music, and memory. Often these approaches have been more deeply self-reflective, as sensations, feelings, and sounds are understood to be authenticated by past remembrance and personal experience. D. Robert DeChaine (2002) took an autoethnographic approach in revealing the experience of self-awareness that individuals experience in music. To DeChaine, "a thorough consideration of music demands taking into account music's *grain*, the crackles and hums of its rarified sonic vibrations" (p. 83). DeChaine's project is animated by a desire to understand the relationship between sound, music, and memory. For example, he argues that "the essence of all music resides in its character as a sound-signifier" (p. 82). Simon Frith (1996) makes a similar argument when he states that our affective responses to music are "caused by the experience of the sounds themselves, by our response to what is happening structurally" (p. 104). These

experiences serve to shape sounds, and subsequently, they influence our understandings of what it means to experience music and sound authentically.

This work has proven instrumental in laying the groundwork for rhetoric's perceived "sonic turn." Such a turn has been messily understood and often elusive of methodological direction. In a review essay in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, Gunn et al. (2013) set to resolve some of these confusions by arguing that the difference between sound studies and rhetorical studies is that "sound persists whether or not it has taken on meaning (i.e., whether or not the sonic has been delivered to, by, or with language)" (p. 476). These scholars suggest that sound studies can be found in a range of different "points of audition" (p. 478). One of these points is the study of soundscapes, within which Gunn et al. situate the work of rhetorical scholar Thomas Rickert and his 2013 book *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being*. Rickert argues that material environs should no longer be viewed as merely complements to rhetorical theory, but absolutely integral to understanding it (p. xiii). An ambient rhetoric, according to Rickert, includes "the material environment, things (including the technological), our own embodiment, and a complex understanding of ecological relationality as participating in rhetorical practices and their theorization" (p. 3). Rickert's insights will be instrumental in my discussions of the sonic similarity between soul music's past and present, especially as it relates to the studio preferences and geographic and spatial considerations of the soul musicians themselves.

As I have shown in this overview, notions of authenticity in popular music involve disputes over style, posture, aesthetics, sound, and affect. All of these qualities are covered at some point in the subsequent chapters, as they all exert considerable influence on the way that traditional and contemporary soul musicians perform their authenticity. In the following section I

describe the methodological assumptions that will guide my inquiry and also provide a brief summary of each of the chapters of this dissertation.

Methods and Chapter Outline

To summarize, my theoretical/methodological approach to this project assumes authenticity to be a socially constructed rhetorical practice that sits at the intersection of two distinct, yet interrelated, disciplinary contexts: 1) rhetoric, music, and memory and 2) rhetoric and music/sound. Throughout the discussion of these contexts, I have drawn attention to insufficiencies within current theoretical/methodological approaches to the study of authenticity, but I have also highlighted those approaches most useful in answering my research questions.

Moreover, these approaches could benefit from a greater attentiveness to the historically informed norms that provide the resources for evaluation of authenticity. As I hope my dissertation will make clear, oftentimes these norms are predicated on assumptions regarding history that are themselves unresolved, such as in the contested nature of authentic soul music. When this is ignored, like the way it has been neglected in studies of authenticity and both memory and authenticity and performance, the scholarship ends up drawing conclusions based off of assumptions regarding authenticity that are imposed on the texts by the critic.

As mentioned, I take authenticity to be governed by social norms, and this implies an approach that critiques the texts that contribute to those norms. Even within the study of affects and sound, recent scholarship confirms that these elements are materially and discursively produced. As Eric King Watts (2012) suggests, “intense affects can tighten or dissolve alignments and social configurations, depending on the discursive and material characteristics

imbricated in the fluid ecology of the system” (p. 15). As Watts demonstrates throughout his book, our assumptions regarding aesthetic judgments, the beauty or ugliness of certain rhetorical acts, often involves qualities of affect (p. 27). Additionally, I would also suggest that determinations of beauty are also determinations of “authenticity,” making the connections between authenticity, sound, and affect even more concomitant.

Moreover, evaluations of affect are also evaluations of the social norms that govern the criteria used to judge those affects. I assume these social norms to be expressed in the texts, narratives, speech, and symbols that complement the affective qualities of texts. Most importantly, this dissertation is attuned to the contextual factors that influence and are influenced by contestations of authenticity. In this way, I find Lawrence Grossberg’s notion of “mattering maps” instructive in locating the norms that teach us how to “live within emotional and ideological histories” (p. 82). My methodological approach therefore emphasizes both texts and contexts and the ways in which affect produces and is produced by both. This assumption will guide my analysis of both affect and of sound, as critical interpretations of both turn on their material and discursive elements. I take these elements to be informed by historical precedent and codified into social norms through rhetoric and rhetorical practice. I agree wholeheartedly with Allan Moore when he argues that popular music analysis requires a “bifocality of perspective: enough insider’s knowledge and empathy to understand a music’s power, and enough outsider’s critical stance and historical perspective to locate and explain that power within a larger context” (p. 38). This bifocality of perspective is critically important in ensuring that music’s power—the affective response it produces and the artistic craftsmanship that goes into producing that response—does not get too lost in the sometimes arcane jargon of cultural studies, or in the overly complex descriptions of musicologists.

I believe this textual/contextual/historical method to be the most inclusive approach to the study of my objects of analysis; moreover, it is the best positioned to overcome the theoretical shortcomings of current conceptions of authenticity that I have already outlined. I believe an analysis of soul music benefits greatly from a multiple-method approach, given both the inherent ambiguity of authenticity as an evaluative term and the multi-sensory ways in which it is experienced. Further, historians of soul music are still unresolved in their various understandings of what might constitute authentic soul music. These evaluations, as my dissertation will show, are wrought with political and racial implications that continue to hover over soul music's contemporary revival, as seen in the Daptone and Numero Group labels. Historians are but one group that contributes to understandings of authenticity in soul music. Journalists and critics often use the term and its associations to pass judgment on the worthiness of certain album releases or to evaluate the sincerity of the artist's output or public persona. Besides these critics and journalists, what one might call the secondary "interpreters" of authenticity, the artists themselves have a lot to gain or lose when constructing their own sense of authenticity. In interviews, for example, these artists try to exert some influence on how their music is experienced by the public by yoking their sense of artistic identity to specific conceptions of authenticity. Besides the work of journalists, critics, and the artists themselves, the way the music sounds is also an absolutely essential component of authenticity's construction within soul music. Soul music is first and foremost about feeling, and that sense of feeling is transmitted sonically. To ignore the sonic qualities of the music itself is to also ignore one of the most important ways that soul music authenticates itself.

It is for these reasons that I have advocated for a multiple-method approach in this dissertation. In Chapter 2, I describe and evaluate the ways that authenticity has been differently

conceived within soul music's past. The work of historians Brian Ward, Gerri Hirshey, Peter Guralnick, and Robert Gordon will be instrumental in this analysis. The determinations of authenticity that inform these historical accounts provide the historical context within which Daptone and Numero Group are situated. They are in constant conversation with this past, and as I show, authenticity is a concept woven into the very fabric of soul music. In chapter 2 I will use these historical narratives as my objects of analysis and will demonstrate how these narratives handle notions of authenticity. Of particular concern, I will analyze moments in these historical recollections where authenticity is in the most dispute and where these historians seem to contradict one another. In chapter 3, I explore how authenticity has been conceived of by the musicians and producers at Daptone Records. Responding to a series of anxieties about the encroachment of digital technology in recorded music, Daptone situates itself as a paragon of throwback aesthetics and as an unwavering champion of musical spontaneity and sonic imperfection. Such a posture locates Daptone as both a conservative adherent to traditional aesthetics, and as a progressive emblem of counterculture ethics. Such a tension, as I argue, throws into dispute easy suggestions about what might constitute "progress" in American popular music. In this chapter I use collected interviews with the performers, newspaper and magazine profile features on Daptone Records, song lyrics, the label's website design, personal correspondence, and music critic reviews as my objects of analysis in providing support for my judgments about Daptone's appeals to authenticity and their anxieties about digital technology.

This tension is further illuminated in chapter 4, where I use the case study of the Numero Group record label to demonstrate how the influence of nostalgic thinking has relegated "authentic" soul music to something that must be preserved in an archive. Such logic, I argue, carries with it a sense of defeat and hopelessness, not to mention a sense of racial paternalism,

that views much contemporary music as meritless. To make this argument, I analyze the biographical liner notes to the Grammy-nominated box set, *Syl Johnson: A Complete Mythology*. Through this analysis, I demonstrate how Ken Shipley, one of the Numero Group's owners and the author of the liner notes, attempts to assert his own authenticity through the telling of Johnson's story. Additionally, I use collected interviews and magazine and newspaper profiles as evidence of the preservationist (and defeatist) ethic that animates the Numero Group's archival projects. In chapter 5, I engage most principally with the work of Thomas Rickert in drawing comparisons between the traditional soul of Stax Records and the contemporary sounds of Daptone. In this discussion I attempt to advance rhetorically-informed understandings of sound by suggesting that environment, place, space, and geography are fundamental to understanding how contemporary soul music is made to sound authentic. In doing so, I attempt to move "authentic" soul out of the archive and into the present by showing how the features of sound and ambience, as well as historical legacy, go about establishing sonic authenticity among contemporary soul musicians. To do this, I once again turn to artist interviews and newspaper and magazine profiles as my objects of study. I also analyze some of Daptone's promotional materials as suggestive of the parallels they attempt to draw between themselves and Stax Records.

Finally, in chapter 6 I provide a few summarizing thoughts about authenticity, while also offering up a broader critique about the false dichotomy in popular music scholarship between politics and aesthetics. I do this as a way of suggesting future directions for such scholarship at the intersection of authenticity, popular music, and sound studies.

In this introductory chapter I explained some of my critiques of theories of authenticity and its relationship to contemporary soul music and have offered ways in which they might be remedied. One of these ways, as I have suggested, would be to root analyses of contemporary soul music and authenticity in its historical antecedents. As *NPR's* Ann Powers (2011) described in a story on the contemporary soul revival, “retro-soul artists are expected to be less ‘fake’ than other musicians, because the legacy they mine is so strongly linked to ideals of ‘down home’ authenticity and ‘raw’ emotional openness.” In this sense, the legacy of soul music’s past provides the backdrop and reference points for contemporary soul musicians. Their sense of authenticity is derived from the ways they conceive of this past and selectively integrate these “authentic” signifiers into their own art. It is first necessary, however, to evaluate just how authenticity has been conceived of within soul music’s past. If Powers is right, and soul music’s legacy burdens its contemporary performers with difficult-to-attain ideals, then what exactly are these ideals, and why are they burdening? Most importantly, what are the political, moral, and ethical implications of the predominant assumptions regarding “authentic” soul music? This will be the focus of the following chapter.

Chapter 2: Soul Music's "Authentic" History

Introduction: What is soul music?

At this point, it seems necessary to ask the question, "what exactly is soul music?" Soul, at its simplest, is a genre of music. Musical genres, according to Simon Frith (1996), are organized along a set of rules. They consist of formal and technical rules (the sound), semiotic rules (how music works as rhetoric), behavioral rules (performative qualities), social and ideological rules (the social image of the artist), and finally, commercial and juridical rules (the means of production) (pp. 91-94). These rules govern the categorization of music, giving historians, connoisseurs, casual fans, disc jockeys, and recording executives a set of common characteristics that "integrates an inquiry about the music (what does it sound like) with an inquiry about the market (who will buy it)" (p. 76). Like genres of any type, these categories are often problematically rendered, as the "rules" along which they are organized are wrought with political, social, and economic implications.

Obviously, there exists no single authoritative history of soul music. As George Lipsitz (1990) notes in *Time Passages*, such a project would always be necessarily incomplete because "the complexities and pluralities of the past always resist definitive evaluation and summary" (p. 21). Nevertheless, the genre of soul music has been guided by these categorizing "rules," which have given the history of the music some semblance of continuity and historical precision. As such, a dominant narrative begins to emerge about what exactly soul music is and the qualities that one must possess to play it authentically. However, my goal in this chapter is not to try to coalesce the histories of soul music into an even tighter, definitive history; rather, I am concerned with problematizing the continuities that have been established in soul music's

emergent narrative and illuminating the social consequences that emerge when these continuities are thrown into tension. In addition, I argue that these tensions play themselves out in the language of authenticity—a language that continues to exert an undeniable residual influence on those passing judgment on contemporary soul music. Present-day soul music is deeply conversant with its past, and while modern day critics of contemporary soul music might evoke this past under the guise that it is definitive, I will use the rest of this chapter to show the cracks in soul music’s “authentic” history. In the service of this argument, this chapter will unfold in three parts: first, I briefly describe soul music’s dominant historical narrative; second, I highlight the tensions in this narrative; and finally, I offer a concluding section that connects these tensions to the present-day soul revival.

Soul Music’s Dominant Narrative

In describing their image of soul music, many lay persons would likely describe it using similar terms. Conventional wisdom suggests that soul music is played by exclusively black musicians for black audiences. Soul music had a brief flowering in the mid-1960s before receding into obscurity in the early 1970s. Soul music, the logic goes, dovetailed with the Civil Rights Movement, and its performers evangelized the tenets of the Black Power Movement. Aesthetically, soul performers are especially impassioned in their singing and resolute in their commitment to uninhibited showmanship. This is the conventional story that has been circulated in the American consciousness for decades. These images and anecdotes contribute much to the way most Americans perceive soul music. However, much of this history obscures so many contradictions in logic, faulty assumptions about racial purity, and unsteady interpretations of what is and what is not authentic soul music.

In attempting to describe this dominant, yet mistaken narrative, I return to Frith's schematic, rule-based model for genre categorization. In terms of formal and technical rules, Joel Rudinow (2011) surveys five of the most prominent historians of soul music and concludes that they all describe soul as a "merger between gospel music and secular forms of popular music—blues, rhythm & blues, and rock & roll" (p. 17). This merger was thought to have occurred on the heels of 1950s R&B music, and by the mid-1960s "soul was already a rich and variegated bloom in the Rhythm and Blues garden" (Ward, 1998, p. 183). Rudinow points to the specific case of gospel singer Sam Cooke's 1957 crossover pop single "You Send Me" as one of soul's originary moments. Historian Brian Ward (1998) likewise describes soul's origins in the gospel church as fundamental to its sonic qualities. This was most notable in soul music's "tumbling gospel triplets, its call and response instrumental and vocal patterns, the regular rustle of sanctified tambourines, and the energizing slap of get-happy handclaps" (p. 184). Further, voice reigns supreme in soul music. As Gerri Hirshey (1984) describes, "the sound—the story—of soul music is contained in those voices and the infinite change-ups they worked on twelve notes and an equally basic set of human emotions" (p. xiv). In foregrounding the importance of the sound of the voice to soul music, historian Peter Guralnick (1986) states that soul is perceived to be "incomparably more passionate, emotionally expressive, and individualistic" than other musical forms (p. 2). He even suggests that soul music is "the last of the great vocal arts" (p. 8).

These formal and technical rules are intimately related to soul's semiotic rules. These rules ask the question, "how is 'truth' or 'sincerity' indicated musically?" (Frith, 1996, p. 91). Semiotic rules govern the interactions between performer and audience as they reveal themselves in lyrics and expression (p. 91). Gayle Wald (1998) argues that "soul required the singer to touch his or her audience through the performance of emotional authenticity" (p. 148). Noted cultural

critic Paul Gilroy (1987) even goes as far as to argue that soul musicians of the mid to late 1960s were “mandated to speak on behalf of the community in elaborate, celebratory, ritual performances” (p. 177). James Brown and Aretha Franklin, in Gilroy’s view, should best be perceived as “spiritual and moral guardians” of black American culture (p. 177). Guralnick argues that soul music “accompanied the Civil Rights Movement almost step by step” (p. 2). It is undeniable, or at least it appears undeniable, that soul music was deeply connected to the emerging black consciousness of the Civil Rights era, as performers were thought to embody this emergent consciousness and project it to their black audiences.

This suggests that soul music achieves what Lawrence Grossberg (1992) has called an “excess of affective investment” (p. 86). Grossberg argues that “the more powerful the affective investment, the more powerfully it must be ideologically legitimated” (p. 86). In this sense, soul music’s association with unbridled emotion—it is music from the *soul* after all—necessarily requires an ideological legitimation that is equally forceful, equally capable of suggesting the “condition of possibility for the optimism, invigoration, and passion which are necessary for any struggle to change the world” (p. 86). Classic soul music may not have changed the world, but the affective investments made by its audiences and performers guaranteed its resilience as a cultural form of uncommon depth. It is this affective investment, and its resulting ideological legitimation, that connects the formal and technical qualities of the music with its semiotic and ideological components.

Equally important are soul’s behavioral rules. These rules are “gestural,” and they involve the display of personality onstage, in addition to “offstage performance, behavior in interviews, packaged performance, the artist in videos and press photographs” (Frith, 1996, p.

92). Authentic soul music, according to the sentiments of the time, “was habitually reduced to simple connotations of sexual freedom, sensual pleasure, and a sheer expressiveness which was apparently unmediated by mental process or moral conscience” (Ward, 1998, p. 241). Musicians such as Otis Redding personified the spirit of soul music, a fact attributable to his overly emotive physical gestures and “sheer, sweaty conviction” (p. 244). Soul musicians became recognizable by giving the appearance of “living, loving, losing, and lusting at the very limits of human existence” (p. 244). To briefly provide another illustration of this impulse towards extreme expressivity, Guralnick (1986) describes James Brown’s legendary 1962 performance at the Apollo Theater as one meant to “create a portrait of himself that achieves verisimilitude, like the best fiction, by acknowledging the necessity of dramatic artifice” (p. 236)¹. Soul musicians, the logic dictates, “tease the audience into imagining, and provoking, what will happen next” (p. 236). These histories suggest that not only were these performers pushing the limits of expression, they were also pushing the limits of personal respectability writ large. To give one example, Hirshey (1984) goes to great length in describing Wilson Pickett’s notoriously “wicked” personality, a trait exacerbated by Pickett himself when he suggested that he really is a “mean motherfucker” (p. 43). Such “wicked” personality characteristics were also attributed to Etta James, Aretha Franklin, and James Brown (Camalier, 2013). In this sense, soul musicians are overly emotive, emotion-baring, excessive, difficult, and even menacing.

To summarize, the dominant histories of soul music have tended to emphasize its southern gospel origins, its connectedness to the Civil Rights Movement and to black

¹ This recording documents Brown’s October 24, 1962 concert at Harlem’s Apollo Theater. The album was listed by *Rolling Stone Magazine* as the 25th best album of all time, and the Library of Congress added it to the National Recording Registry in 2003. Historian Craig Werner (1998) has argued that it is the “greatest live soul album ever recorded” (p. 138).

consciousness, its overly expressive convictions, and the sometimes threatening and difficult personalities of its performers. This story relies on an understanding of soul music as deeply and unmistakably connected to the history of black Americans during the 1960s. Much of this conventional history makes presuppositions about racial purity and, moreover, uses these assumptions in formulating notions of how authentic soul music should look, sound, and feel. In the following sections I problematize this conceptualization and contest the dominant narrative that has been told and retold about what puts the soul in soul music in order to offer a more complex picture of that which today's soul music is always already compared.

Contesting Soul's Narrative

In contesting this dominant narrative I am not hoping to refute all historical anecdotes or to suggest that some of this history is not rooted in anything more than problematic assumption. However, what I will do is illuminate those moments where the authenticity of the genre is contested and where the history is at its most blatantly fallacious and confused. In order to most clearly illuminate this confused history, I have chosen to focus primarily on issues of race, geography, and aesthetics because these are the places where soul music's history has not only been the most egregiously misstated, but also because these factors continue to exert influence on the contemporary soul music revival. In order to accomplish these goals, I have chosen to demonstrate these tensions through the following series of oppositions: white v. black; north v. south; planned v. spontaneous; and perfect v. imperfect.

White v. Black

Many of the essentializing interpretations of race, soul, and audience composition can trace their origins back to Norman Mailer's landmark 1957 essay on the "White Negro," which Brian Ward describes as someone who used "be-bop and, to a lesser extent, R&B, as a sonic symbol for their general alienation from mainstream, 'white', cultural norms and societal expectations" (p. 238). Mailer's essay certainly reinforces stereotypes of African-Americans as guided by their bodily instincts and unbothered by intellectual demands. Moreover, black musicians are viewed as supplying specific cultural cues that white audiences use as guiding principles in forming their own hipster status. According to Ward, these suggestions "tended to reduce black musicians and the complexities of black urban culture to nothing more than the unremittingly cool, hedonistic, darkly passionate stuff of their highly racialized imaginations" (p. 238). LeRoi Jones (1963) sought to evade this co-optation by "white negroes" by drawing bold lines of separation between white and black music. His widely cited *Blues People*, written in 1963 right as soul music was becoming an understood genre, was a formative, if troublingly problematic, exploration of "soul" in black American music and culture. Jones argued that soul music, as expressed in the hard-bop jazz of Horace Silver and others, amounted to a "conscious re-evaluation" of the Negro musician's roots (p. 218). Soul, according to Jones, represents a "new establishment" that Whites should see as a liability "since the culture of white precludes the possession of the Negro 'soul'" (p. 219). Jones therefore inaugurates soul as a term representing a fixed essence only accessible to black musicians. Jones sees soul as a part of a reclamation of lost "Negro-ness" and as the natural precursor to the establishment of a new order of values (pp. 218-219). Such essentialist renderings of soul are consistent with philosophical notions of authentic selfhood, such as those expressed by rhetorical scholar Corey Anton (2001), that resist explanations of authenticity as constructed through socialization (p. 154). Soul hereby

describes an essence that can be tapped only by a select few—its performative qualities only capable of being realized by those who have lived the experience and evaded all attempts at “dilution” (p. 131). Authentic soul and authentic blackness are therefore concomitant, mutually dependent terms.

While an enormously influential work, *Blues People*'s conception of soul as an immanent characteristic has fallen out of favor even as its colloquial understanding (“that singer has soul!”) has endured. As Ward (1998) argues, tying the idea of “soul” to notions of “authentic blackness” results in “a rather crude form of Afrocentrism which is unable to acknowledge any kind of cross-racial cultural exchange” (p. 11). David Grazian (2003) likewise argues that “blackness connotes an extreme sense of authenticity, or what we might call the cultural construction of ‘soul’ as a dominant racial stereotype” (p. 36). For these reasons, Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green (1998) defiantly resist pinning “soul” to intrinsic, racially-derived essences in their edited collection *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure* (pp. 2-3). Similar to understandings of authenticity, Guillory and Green prefer to follow an understanding of “soul” that privileges how it is perceived, evoked, and recognized over how it might be objectively verified or defined. In a wonderful summation, Guillory and Green argue that “soul bears as much relevance to contemporary considerations of identity politics as do race and class, yet it tempers these matters with elements of passion and finesse” (pp. 3-4). Guillory and Green’s collection is thus purposely elusive when it comes to privileging any definition of “soul” over another, but by asserting its connection to passion and finesse they do unequivocally link soul to passion, affect, and intensities of feeling (p. 3). Nevertheless, most of the contributors to their edited volume draw unmistakable parallels between soul music and black Americans.

This notion has certainly been contested. Despite its perceived origins in the black church, soul music's ascendance as a popular culture art form was met with a corresponding adjustment in what might be properly called "soul music." For one, Guralnick states that the one "irreducible component of Southern soul music was its racial mix" (p. 10). Ward describes this as paradoxical, but it nonetheless "constituted quite remarkable progress against a racial system which had seemed entirely unassailable" (p. 218). Famed record producer Jerry Wexler of Atlantic Records called the racial mix in soul music "one of the anomalies of the era," while Guralnick states that the realization that white songwriters Dan Penn and Spooner Oldham had authored so many soul classics "seemed heretical to me" (Camalier, 2013, Guralnick, 1986, p. 12). Penn and Oldham also worked in concert with Muscle Shoals' all-white house band, The Swampers. Comprised of drummer Roger Hawkins, guitarist Jimmy Johnson, bassist David Hood, and keyboardist Barry Beckett, these musicians backed up Aretha Franklin, Etta James and Wilson Pickett and played on 75 gold and platinum records.

At Stax Records in Memphis, white guitarist Steve Cropper and white bassist Donald "Duck" Dunn were accompanied by black organist Booker T. Jones and black drummer Al Jackson Jr. to comprise Booker T. & the MG's, who served as the Stax house band. Other examples of interracial collaboration include the mixed race, mixed gender band Sly & the Family Stone and the celebrated collaborations between white guitarist Duane Allman and black soul vocalists Wilson Pickett, Aretha Franklin, and Clarence Carter. Narratives of racial harmony are ubiquitous in historical accounts of this era of soul music. Although they occasionally drift into sanctimonious moralizing, these narratives capture an unquestionably rich exchange of racial experience, ensuring soul music's appeal could not be easily dismissed as appealing to and arising from circumstances exclusive to any certain racial category.

As British musicologist Philip Tagg (1989) has stated, the notion that there are distinct categories of “black” music and “white” music becomes untenable because such arguments often rely on questionable essentialist understandings of racial purity. According to Tagg, such attributions are “tantamount to posing the racist hypothesis that there are physiological connections between the colour of people’s skin and the sort of music people with that colour of skin produce” (p. 4). I sympathize with Tagg’s argument and am equally resistant to such sweeping generalities about the one-to-one relationship between race and musical style. Not only do such definitions rely on shaky racial assumptions, many stylistic qualities taken to be distinct to “black” music, such as call-and-response phrasing and so-called “blue” notes, can be traced to Scandinavian, Indian, and Jewish origins (pp. 7-9). Such attributions are still prevalent in historical interpretations, such as when Craig Werner (1998) problematically suggests that features such as call-and-response phrasing form the “core of a gospel politics” that is a “principle of African-American culture” (p. 11).

However, I recognize it is equally critical to avoid attributing soul music’s success solely to these interracial partnerships. Gayle Wald (1998) astutely argues in her discussion of soul that “the glib celebration of hybridity that sometimes emerges under the banner of postmodernism threatens to erase the complex history of struggle that informs the cultural practices of marginalized populations” (p. 140). It is therefore an obvious and unassailable fact that soul music could not possibly have achieved cultural prominence without the unwavering, resolute commitment of black musicians to racial progress and racial pride. Such assumptions, I argue, ascribe agency to both black musicians and the black audiences who consumed the music of these musicians, while still recognizing that these records were also purchased by white audiences as well. As Brian Ward suggests, black soul audiences of the 1960s were exhibiting

“self-conscious assertions of racial pride” in their purchasing of soul music, and these assertions are one of the “most important legacies of the Movement, and a defining characteristic of the black power era” (p. 3).

While important, Ward’s proof is often far too reliant on patterns of consumption as evidence of the dissolution of racial stereotype. Such an argument, that one asserts their racial identity through choices in the marketplace, leaves out all of the factors that structure those choices. One of the factors that influenced consumption patterns, and judgments about authenticity for that matter, was the singer’s geographic location. In the next section, I turn to the dichotomous relationship between northern and southern soul.

North v. South

As white audiences were beginning to become interested in soul music they were likewise interested in “authentic” (black) blues music, which they considered authentic only insofar as it conformed to perceptions they had about blues’ geographical origins. These white blues audiences of the early to mid-1960s rejected as inauthentic all black pop and soul music, “in favor of artists who seemed suitably steeped in an older, purer, allegedly pre-commercial or sub-commercial Delta blues tradition” (p. 240). Authenticity, according to historian Paul Oliver, related almost solely to “a singer’s proximity to the country” (qtd in Ward, 1998, p. 240). In this sense, the racialized expectations of white audiences also took on a spatial dimension, reinforcing stereotypes of black primitivism and destitution by placing them in geographic opposition to the more pruned and tailored sounds of city blues and soul. These characteristics were sought out for their perceived authenticity, and as the work of David Grazian (2003) and

Stephen A. King (2006, 2011) have shown, these expectations still guide many white audience's perceptions of authenticity in blues and soul music.

As noted earlier, the relationship between geography, audience expectation, and authenticity is an omnipresent concern in Peter Guralnick's *Sweet Soul Music*. In fact, this relationship heavily influences how soul music itself is given definitional certainty. Guralnick only considers soul music from the South to be "true" soul music (p. 6). As historian Robert Gordon (2013) argues in *Respect Yourself: Stax Records and the Soul Explosion*, Memphis, Tennessee's Stax Records was "raw, gritty, gutsty soul" but Detroit's soul label, Motown, was "contemporary, sophisticated, polished soul" (p. 202). Gerri Hirshey likewise argues that "city soul grafted urban sophistications to root forms brought up from the South; southern soul stayed rawboned and simple" (p. xiii). True, deep soul was "pumped, undiluted out of Memphis, Tennessee," argues Hirshey (p. 116). Despite this, Hirshey, along with Craig Werner (1998), Joel Rudinow (2011), and Brian Ward (1998), all include Motown Records to be "soul" music despite Guralnick's flippant dismissal. Rudinow even demonstrates the folly in Guralnick's conception by pointing to Ray Charles, whom Guralnick's extols as soul music's finest progenitor, as someone whose career owes much more to his proximity to Seattle and New York City than his hometown in Florida (p. 13).

Further, these sorts of geographical dichotomies are likewise presented as distinctions of authenticity, with Detroit's Motown (self-christened "Hitsville U.S.A") presented as the culturally refined "safe" alternative to the uninhibited rawness of Stax (self-christened "Soulsville U.S.A"). Guralnick argues that Motown artists rarely, if ever, uncorked a "full-blooded scream," and they only occasionally revealed a "flash of raw emotion" (p. 7).

Guralnick's aesthetic judgments seem derived from an acceptance that any "industry aimed specifically at reaching the white market," especially those as fastidious about artist control as Motown, was necessarily incapable of "elevating feeling" above all else (p. 8). Southern soul music, by Guralnick's account, was a "haven for free-lancers and individualists" in which "feeling dictated the rhythm" (p. 8). Nelson George (1985) even goes as far as to argue that "hip whites and progressive blacks" began to find Motown's "yearning upward mobility and occasionally overbearing production values a bore" (p. 128). In George's view "Stax was the 'real thing,' the 'hip thing,' and what black America was 'really all about,'" while groups like Motown's Temptations, with their genteel tuxedos and mannered stage presence, represented the worst vestiges of Uncle Tom-like deference to white America (p. 128). In this sense, the geographical differences also reinforced racial expectations, with the North seemingly incapable of producing authentic soul music while the South produced such music with effortless conviction.

In extending this discussion, I want to offer a quick illustration to demonstrate my point. Consider Nelson George's argument about Motown's polish being a stylistic marker of black subservience to white interests. Motown's management was nearly all black and their musicians, with few exceptions, were also all black. In fact, George even acknowledges, as so many others have, that Motown represented one of the most formidable assertions of black entrepreneurialism that had existed to that point (p. 201). Meanwhile, the "real" soul of Macon, Georgia; Memphis, Tennessee; and Muscle Shoals, Alabama, had almost exclusively white ownership and utilized backing bands comprised mainly of white musicians. As Craig Werner (1998) argues, "it may seem like something of a contradiction that what was most universally received as the blackest of the soul styles had by far the largest amount of white participation" (p. 72). It becomes too

simple, then, to attribute issues of authenticity in the sound and style of soul music purely to racial categorizations based on skin color, and as I've explained, these categorizations are broken down by region. As jazz trumpeter Miles Davis, a person who often used integrated, geographically diverse bands, stated, "I wouldn't give a damn if he was green with red breath. I'm hiring a motherfucker to play, not for what color he is" (Werner, 1998, p. 140).

In the same way that race is a social construct, authenticity is likewise given salience through social validation, and often these two constructs overlap and knit together counterintuitively. To suggest that music appealing to white audiences in the North would be absent of "feeling," while arguing that music appealing to black audiences in the South would "elevate" feeling above all else certainly implicates other criteria for judgment than simply analyzing audience consumption patterns or merely pointing to geographical difference as a sufficient explanation. One must make sense of "feeling," translating it into words, arguing over its appearances, and debating the processes through which it is filtered. In the following section, I describe how these audience expectations and geographical distinctions were most often based on assumptions about how authenticity should *sound*. These arguments are primarily axiological, and they often foreground questions of technology, social progress, the merits of sonic perfection, and the pursuit of ordered spontaneity in crafting an authentic soul tune. Rudinow (2011) argues that "geography ... remains a key factor in understanding soul music, which is to say that distinctive regional stylistic variations are discernible and significant" (p. 15). In this sense, geography is tied directly to aesthetics and style, and those differences, like so many others, are realized through arguments about authenticity. In the following section I describe how arguments about authenticity, and geography for that matter, also involve disagreements about how planned or spontaneous the music should sound.

Planned v. Spontaneous

As I contend, soul music aspires to and achieves perceptions of authenticity based fundamentally on the way it sounds, not necessarily where it comes from or who it is intended to reach. I am not suggesting that issues of sound were not crassly manipulated so as to appeal to certain demographics, nor am I arguing that, in some circumstances, geography directly influenced the music. However, words and phrases like “grit,” “polish,” “down home,” “rawboned,” etc.—words that are continuously used in drawing distinctions between authentic and inauthentic soul music—are most principally arguments over aesthetics and arguments about the recording process itself. For this reason, someone like Diana Ross, singer for Motown’s The Supremes, can be judged as “pop confection” and lacking in grit, even though she grew up in Detroit’s housing projects (Werner, 1998, p. 98). Ross is not perceived to be as authentic a soul singer as someone like Aretha Franklin because of the aesthetics of her voice. Her featherweight “coo” is not perceived to plumb the depths of the soul like Aretha’s caterwauling shrieks and possessed sense of purpose (p. 123).

So many historians and critics of soul music make these sorts of arguments about authenticity without investigating the assumptions upon which they are based. For instance, they often suggest that characteristics like spontaneity, imperfection, and impromptu jamming are what delineate authentic Southern soul music from the more orchestrated finesse of Motown, Atlantic Records, and Chicago soul. These become the primary lines of distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic.

For example, Werner (1998) suggests that “Memphis soul grew out of a much freer, improvisational process” than that of Motown and that the southern soul of Memphis’ Stax and

Nashville's Goldwax produced some of the "funkiest and grittiest" soul of the era (p. 76, 72). While Werner acknowledges that Motown and Stax musicians exhibited mutual appreciation for one another's work, he nevertheless argues that a typical Stax session "involved building a record out of scraps of lyrics, the idea of a melody, a few chord changes" (p. 76). Such a process involved "laying down a groove" and creating a sense of space between the notes (pp. 76-77). These songs were meant to swing and groove, and part of cultivating that sound involved avoidance of the "wall of sound" production techniques of Motown (p. 77). Gerri Hirshey makes a similar argument when she states that "unlike gutbucket soul, sprung from a moment, Motown was built, layer by layer, with a conscious aural blueprint" (p. 116). Hirshey implies that authenticity emerges from-the-moment, as if having a conscious plan requires too much deliberation to possibly ring true as a statement of authenticity. Many of these characterizations are informed by interviews of the performers themselves, such as when guitarist Steve Cropper of Booker T. & the MG's suggests that their classic hit "Green Onions" came about as a result of simply "jamming around" on a riff (p. 306). He also states that Otis Redding, with whom Cropper penned so many soul classics, would often simply ad-lib lyrics and that the tight schedule at Stax produced a spontaneous recording environment that forced a sense of hurried urgency on the performers (p. 340).

Guralnick argues that even the arrival of Otis Redding to Stax Records in Memphis was, "like almost everything else that happened at Stax ... both unforeseen and unplanned" (p. 128). In a story replete with accoutrements of questionable veracity, Guralnick states that Redding was merely the valet for another singer, Johnny Jenkins, the day he arrived at Stax Recording Studios in Memphis. Because the session went so terribly, Redding pleaded with guitarist Steve Cropper and Stax founder Jim Stewart to let him use the last 30 minutes of the session to cut a track. The

band's regular keyboardist, Booker T. Jones, had already left the session, forcing Cropper onto the keys where he nervously laid down the iconic triplets that open Redding's classic "These Arms of Mine" (pp. 128-129). Gerri Hirshey adds that "often one night's live blooper would ripen into a habit," such as when Redding would forget a lyric and cue his band to play a few extra verses to build momentum until he remembered the lyrics.

Robert Gordon (2013) makes similar observations about Memphis' Stax Records. At Stax there was "free passage between the control room and the studio floor" (p. 81). Gordon asserts that "no musician's parts were written, nothing was worked out in advance" and that Rufus Thomas' hit "Walking the Dog" was entirely improvised. Guralnick states that one of the other "authentic" locales for southern soul music, Muscle Shoals, Alabama, derived much of its acclaim through the "intangible sense of inspired chaos" that permeated the personalities and the place itself (p. 197). In the early 1970s, as the performers became more conscious of their audiences and the elusive vagaries of contemporary tastes, much of the "soulful spontaneity" of earlier-period soul was lost, never to be regained (Hirshey, 1984, pp. 355-356). In this sense, commitments to careful orchestration and product viability were characteristic of inauthenticity. It was not merely a matter of "selling out," I contend, because both 1960s soul and early-mid 1970s soul were both wildly successful as commercial enterprises. It speaks, instead, to the idea that authenticity comes to the artist in unplanned moments, and that the spirit of the soul is compromised if it is overwrought, overthought, and planned ahead of time. These stories are illustrative of the type of narrative mythology that accompanies notions of authentic soul music because it reinforces the oppositional relationship between Stax and Motown by envisioning the "authentic" as something realized spontaneously. Motown, in Guralnick's view, was "so much more socially acceptable, so much more arranged and predictable, so much more white" (p. 250).

Robert Gordon (2013) argues that Berry Gordy, Motown's founder and executive, "applied the assembly-line technique to music—a real contrast to the organic group think at Stax" (p. 70).

The organic and spontaneous features of Memphis' Stax Records were accompanied by a concomitant factor that contributed to its perceived authenticity—Stax was imperfect. This sense of imperfection manifested itself in its approach to recording and served as a way of differentiating itself from Motown, Philadelphia Soul, and Chicago Soul. Perhaps more than any other historical inconsistency, this one has had the most persistent influence on contemporary soul music, as the sense of imperfection has become a cherished declaration of one's obligation to authenticity among contemporary artists. In the following section I describe the final oppositional dichotomy—the perfect v. the imperfect.

Perfection v. Imperfection

Stax was stubborn in its refusal to be as clinical and precise as its peers, and these ideals were foregrounded in the recording process itself. At Stax, the rhythm section called the shots, with the arranger only adding embellishment (Gordon, 2013, p. 82). Such a choice reinforced Stax's adherence to a "mono sensibility" even though stereo technology, allowing for two tracks of playback, was already widely used by most recording studios (p. 82). Such obsolescence gave Stax, in Robert Gordon's words, a sense of "spirit" that their contemporaries lacked. Craig Werner similarly argues that another "authentic" recording studio, Memphis' Hi Studio, used "obsolete equipment that precluded multiple tracking" (p. 180). Werner implies that such choices were part of why the studio's famed Hi Rhythm section were able to "lay down simmering rhythmic grooves for [Al] Green's vocal explorations" (p. 180). Gerri Hirshey goes as far as to

suggest that soul music spirit burned out when “voices lost out to production technique” and “rhythm went from being an exhorter to a tyrant” (p. xv).

Eventually Stax would succumb to market pressures and purchase a four-track recorder allowing for overdubbing and mixing, but the fact that their earliest hits were recorded on a mono machine prevented them from cleaning up mistakes without recording the entire performance over again. The recording preferences of Stax and their Southern soul contemporaries introduced a new associated characteristic of authenticity—a strangely revered sense of imperfection. Craig Werner (1998) argues that “many Southern soul classics incorporate ‘mistakes’ that Motown would have edited out” (p. 77). Examples of this include the horn section that mysteriously disappears during the second chorus of Sam & Dave’s hit “Hold On I’m Coming,” and the noticeably out-of-tune horns at the beginning of Percy Sledge’s indelible “When a Man Loves a Woman” (p. 77). Historian Peter Guralnick, who is outwardly dismissive of Motown in his voluminous *Sweet Soul Music*, proclaims with assuredness that soul music from the South was “a musical mode in which the band might be out of tune, the drummer out of time, the singer off-key, and yet the message could still come across—since underlying feeling was all” (p. 8).

In fact, this championed sense of imperfection is built into the narratives of the performers themselves. For example, FAME Studios in Muscle Shoals recorded their first hit, “You Better Move On,” with an unknown small-town bellhop named Arthur Alexander, whose deferential personality and “unsure” singing style made him an unlikely star (Guralnick, 1986, pp. 191-192). Stax’s house band, Booker T & the MG’s, was comprised mostly of kids from the neighborhood, as was FAME’s Swampers rhythm section. While Motown had entire staffs

dedicated to carefully manicuring a performer's star quality, Muscle Shoals' early days were characterized by a dedicated insistence that imperfect singers with "imperfect" backgrounds could be counted on to produce authentic performances. It was even stated that FAME's rhythm section, The Swampers, looked like they should be bagging your groceries, not backing up soul singers (Camalier, 2013). Percy Sledge himself—whose "When a Man Loves a Woman" made FAME a globally recognized studio—was a completely unknown hospital orderly from rural Alabama with a rough, untrained voice when he entered FAME's studio in 1965 (p. 206). Guitarist Jimmy Johnson states that "Percy was so out of tune" on "When a Man Loves a Woman," that "we thought his voice might break a window. It was almost painful" (p. 208). Despite Sledge's utterly imperfect voice, Johnson contends that the song affected people so powerfully that he had heard stories of "people driving off the road when they heard that record come on the air" (p. 210).

Even Ray Charles had significant "technical deficiencies" in his voice, preventing him from having much natural range (p. 15). As a result, Charles had to "explore every nook and cranny of its [his voice's] emotional resources" (p. 15). Peter Guralnick argues that soul's "message from the heart"—perhaps its most foundational statement of authenticity—is what proves it to be a "truly democratic arena open to anyone as much on the basis of desire as technique, as much on the basis of gut instinct as careful calculation" (p. 15). These narratives of authenticity suggest soul is expressed as an imperfectly packaged outpouring of spontaneous emotion. Its ephemerality results from its lack of precision, its resistance to assembly-line technique. Authentic soul, in this view, privileges the loose contours of rhythm over the delicate precision of vocal technique. Authenticity is an ideal achieved through feeling, emotion, voice, and vibration—not something reflected on philosophically or verified empirically.

However, this particular rendering also implicitly subordinates the intellectual to the emotional. This is especially problematic given that characteristics of “white,” inauthentic soul music can be seen as primarily intellectual in nature. “White” soul made for white audiences is well thought out, orchestrated, manicured, and precise in intent. “Black,” authentic soul music is emotional, spontaneous, lacking in pruned sophistication, and messily imperfect. In a careful critique of this view, Brian Ward (1998) argues that such conceptions of authenticity are rooted in white romanticization of black primitivism (p. 238). Such articulations connect black musician’s perceived effortless spontaneity to “sensual, rather than mental priorities” (p. 238). Even more importantly, Ward argues that such a view precipitates the prevailing wisdom that “real black music ... springs from the instinctual needs of the body, rather than the intellectual or meditative workings of the mind” (p. 265).

Ward’s refutation also connects this stereotyping directly to the narratives of spontaneity and imperfection that accompany notions of the authentic. Ward argues that the “crude reification of black spontaneity” is linked to “the enduring belief that all real black music must be visceral rather than cerebral in character” (p. 265). Ward also suggests that such beliefs were perpetuated by the musicians themselves, who often played into these stereotypes by advertising the dexterity of their improvisations and ignoring all of the post-production edits that spliced together many of the sessions best takes into a single song (pp. 264-265). For example, James Brown’s classic “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag” emerged from an impromptu jam despite the recollections of Brown’s trombonist Fred Wesley (p. 265). Instead, the song was sprung from a “potent combination of inspiration, contemplation, and technological manipulation” (p. 265). In making these arguments, Ward seeks to frustrate the conventional wisdom that privileges spontaneity, imperfection, and technological obsolescence as features of authenticity. Further, his

analysis suggests there is far greater similarity between southern soul and northern soul, Stax and Motown, and “authentic” and “inauthentic” soul music than is suggested by nearly all of the existing literature on the topic.

Conclusion: Moving From the Past to the Present

As should be clear at this point, conceptions of authentic and inauthentic soul music are wrought with racial, social, and technological complications. As I have argued, these complications can be understood as organized along a series of oppositional dichotomies: black v. white; north v. south; planned v. spontaneous; and perfect v. imperfect. The notion of authenticity is paramount in understanding these oppositions, as it is often used as a way to select the criteria upon which judgments of value are made. As I have shown, historians and critics have vehemently disputed authenticity’s claim to an irrefutable, objective essence while nevertheless imagining differences in taste and quality to be built upon assumptions of authenticity. These disputes play out under the theory that soul music had a brief but illustrious run, that its blossoming into a bona fide social movement was played out to the backdrop of circumstances “that one would not want to see repeated” (Guralnick, 1986, pp. 3-4). Soul music, as so many of these histories make clear, is no longer identifiable as a genre of music or even as a practice of artistic expression. Nearly all of these historical accounts end with some sort of self-satisfied lamentation, a moralizing coda to the end of an era, the end of soul, the end of a dream or some other such platitude. By doing so, they introduce a new variable into the discussion of authenticity and soul music: time

To be sure, the events of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements pushed soul music to the forefront of popular consciousness, but music, as I argue, is not made solely by context. It

is made by musicians whose artistic choices are not merely one-to-one reflections of prevailing social conditions. Soul music has too often been interpreted by historians as inextricably bound to a definitive period of time and as sputtering away as the catalyzing events of the 1960s settled into some semblance of relative calm in the mid-1970s. Gerri Hirshey (1984) argues that, in addition to the emergence of disco music, soul disappeared because “black American music won’t stay put” (p. xv.). Even the name of journalist Nelson George’s widely-read book on Motown, *Where Did Our Love Go: The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, suggests certain sounds of this era are terminable and, further, “the co-option of black music, and for that matter, all American musics, by major corporate record companies is now complete” (p. 201). However, George’s assertion that the co-optation of black music was complete ignores the fact that music always arrives already compromised. Suggesting that there existed an uncorrupted soul music sound never to be reclaimed is an admittance of defeat and surely a precondition for feelings of nostalgia and rose-colored retrospection.

Therefore, understanding authenticity in music demands a scholarly investment in qualities beyond context—qualities that are immanent in the music. For example, it is assumed by audiences and critics that musicians still play folk music, jazz music, bluegrass music, etc., even though the current cultural conditions of these styles are undeniably different than those occurring during their originary moments. Soul music historians’ insistence on the temporal finiteness of soul denies it a regenerating capacity, and in the process, tacitly diminishes the sublime outpouring of emotion that makes it so deeply affecting as a form of art. Contemporary musicians still play something understood by critics and fans to be “soul music.” For this reason, I am uncomfortable denying soul music a place in contemporary popular culture simply because

it is no longer symptomatic of any particular overriding social movement or prevailing racial concern.

I have argued throughout this chapter that music, or art of any kind, should never be viewed solely as something obstinately wedded to the context from which it originally emerged. Doing so creates a set of criteria for judgments of authenticity inappropriate to contemporary circumstances and reinforces the problematic assumption that music is always a one-to-one reflection of its socio-political environment. Most importantly, it has the tendency to produce understandings of contemporary soul music that see disputes over authenticity in places where they do not exist while missing them where they do. Authenticity is still of paramount importance to soul musicians and still important to the critics who make judgments about their music.

Even if, as historian Brian Ward suggests, historical notions of authenticity have been arrived at under dubious premises, they nevertheless persist. Their selective activation should best be seen as calculated and strategic responses to felt cultural anxieties of the *present*. Even though authenticity is evoked by present-day soul musicians in response to contemporary anxieties, its evocation is nevertheless informed by its past. The musicians and record label owners in contemporary soul are perceptive and astute in their almost academic knowledge of classic soul. They understand the motivations of the classic performers, the types of feelings and intimacies they projected, and the philosophy that guided their methods of recording. This is a fact not lost on those attempting to interpret these modern sounds in light of their “authentic” predecessors. Critics and commentators have nearly always understood contemporary soul to be in intimate conversation with its past—that it must always be referred to as a “revival” or

accompanied by the word “retro.” In one of the only academic articles written about Daptone, sociologist Oliver Wang (2012) argues that the artists on Daptone Records are not merely influenced by past styles, but “they [classic soul artists] are a template [contemporary] artists try to follow as accurately as possible, within varying degrees” (p. 202). The retro label therefore implies that these artists have reached creative tedium, merely replicating the virtuous sounds of a more authentic era. Contemporary soul cannot escape this legacy, but it is also a legacy that they themselves have chosen to be conversant with.

Such a history has saddled contemporary soul musicians with the added burden of trying to project their authenticity, to recreate that elevated cycle of tension and release, under modern conditions that are perceived as lacking the catalyzing events that gave classic soul its sense of urgency. It is for these reasons that I have used this chapter to trace authenticity through the history of soul music, paying close attention to how its originations, disputes, and interpretations were defined by a sense of obligation to particular qualities of sound. As I have shown, often these interpretations carried with them tacit expectations about race that were both stigmatizing and essentializing. Set to the backdrop of the Black Freedom struggle, soul music of this era foregrounded the politics of race, as soul musicians either overtly or through example sought to empower those with whom they shared a mutual concern for social betterment.

This legacy continues to endure in contemporary soul music, but the socio-political circumstances have changed. The catalyzing urgency might not be there, but the strength of the commitment to authenticity has been reinvigorated in resounding and often surprising ways. These practices of authenticity, such as the insistence on stylistic and sonic imperfection, antiquated technology, and the virtues of spontaneity have been applied by these contemporary

artists to present-day circumstances. The insistence of some contemporary critics to apply the standards of authenticity set by soul's original contexts misdiagnoses much about what is at stake in contemporary disputes of authenticity in modern-day soul music. Critics, as I show in the following chapter, sometimes paint in sloppy broadstrokes when discussing issues of race at Daptone Records, misinterpreting claims to authenticity as indicative of racial exploitation while sometimes missing instances of actual racial concern. In the following chapter I engage critical reviews of Daptone records, and mine interviews with the performers to demonstrate the new types of anxieties that are animating concerns of authenticity in contemporary soul music. These new anxieties intersect with the legacy of classic soul, but their manifestations do more than simply comment on the residual influence of the past—they also speak to contemporary concerns about what constitutes artistic, social, and racial “progress.” In this sense, authenticity still does a lot of rhetorical work even though its “soul” has changed with the times.

Chapter 3: Shitty is Pretty

As noted in chapter 2, soul music's deeply unresolved and often unsettling legacy continues to exert a residual influence on contemporary soul musicians. This is, however, a burden that is welcomed by these artists. They knowingly acknowledge this legacy, simultaneously embracing its requirements of style and sound while dismissing concerns over originality and nostalgia. Such tension has placed Daptone Records in a decidedly uncomfortable place in contemporary American music culture. As a result, some critics do not seem to know how to handle them. Can they be dismissed as a retro novelty act, as conservative imitators of a bygone musical tradition? Or worse, might it even be reasonable to accuse them of selectively activating only certain parts of soul music's past, seeing and imitating the genre's commitments to racial harmony between black and white musicians while ignoring some of the patently racist assumptions that guided these perceptions? Or should they simply be celebrated for their unwavering dedication to capturing the groove and spirit of some of the greatest music ever recorded? In fact, critics and commentators have had all of these reactions to Daptone Records. The goal of this chapter is not to determine who is right and who is wrong in these discussions, but rather to use them as resources for understanding the unique and problematic relationship between soul music's past and present. These problems are most often disputes over authenticity—disputes that I have shown in chapter 2 to be premised on faulty history and stereotyped assumptions. Nevertheless, these assumptions have guided the conventional narrative told about soul music. They are the markers of status used by musicians, audiences, and critics to locate Daptone on the continuum between the authentic and the inauthentic. In this chapter I argue that the music of Daptone Records is perceived to be authentic precisely because it champions the virtues of imperfection in sound, style, and self-presentation. Not only does

their music lack the sheen of digital production, it actively campaigns against such embellishment. Beyond the imperfection of the music itself, Daptone celebrates the flawed bodies of its performers who vehemently resist being categorized by conventional metrics of physical beauty. The Daptone narrative suggests that these imperfect performers and the imperfect sounds that they champion are absolutely essential preconditions for arriving at the authentic outpouring of emotion, feeling, and sensation that has characterized the genre of soul music from its very inception.

On its surface, this championed narrative of virtuous imperfection seems to rest on assumptions about race that perceive black singers, like Daptone's marquee act Sharon Jones, to be more in-tune with their emotions and less conscious of the fussy details that lie at the heart of production, songcraft, and orchestration. Ellis Cashmore (1997) sarcastically notes that "the depth and intensity of emotion that are associated with black soul are not typically available to whites. Yet they come naturally to blacks. So goes the argument" (p. 10). To Cashmore, such attributions of authenticity to "black" soul are akin to the processes of "animalization" that allowed 19th century colonialists to hold dominion over their captors (p. 80). More recently, in a discussion of contemporary soul music and singer Adele, Amanda Nell Edgar (2014) has argued even more bluntly that "authenticity can be examined for what it is: a racialized attempt by the white male music industry to justify its exploitative colonizing presence in black musical culture" (p. 172). *Boston Globe* music critic Siddhartha Mitter even accused Daptone Records of being "colonial" in its relationship with its marquee artist, black soul singer Sharon Jones (Knafo, 2008).

It is true that the Daptone co-founder and producer Gabriel Roth's favorite acts are James Brown and Otis Redding, artists whose reputation as authentic performers are partially derived

from their reputations as visceral, gutwrenching performers unburdened by the shackling effect of over-intellectualized arrangement or meticulous planning (p. 73). I have shown in Chapter 2 that this conventional narrative is hardly an accurate one, but these assumptions about authenticity nevertheless exist as convenient heuristic for hasty critics. The fact that Daptone is a white-owned label comprised mainly of all-white backing bands has led to charges that an “odor of exploitation” hovers over Daptone Records (Mitter, 2010). Sociologist Oliver Wang (2012) even suggests that Daptone’s commitment to an imperfect aesthetic is a conscious, and perhaps even crude, marketing strategy that ensures Daptone’s music only reaches a young, white middle class audience with disposable income (p. 207). It might be easy, then, to simply view Daptone as another example of white music executives exploiting the labor of their emotion-baring, authentic black singers. There is some truth to this critique, as Daptone does indeed champion those characteristics of authenticity that have historically viewed black singers as authentic insofar as they demonstrate that they are sufficiently emotional, seemingly offering reinforcement for Simon Frith’s (1996) argument that African and African-American music is meant to represent the “unsymbolized and unmediated sensual states and expectations” (p. 127).

However well-intentioned these critiques may be, their fixation on a narrow set of racial assumptions about Daptone’s music tends to obscure details that tell a story much more complicated, and I argue, more culturally illuminating than the one dictated by Wang and others. In fact, Daptone’s preference for authenticity-through-imperfection is driven by a logic that foregrounds much larger issues: namely, how specific musical genres rooted in the past assert their authenticity when the circumstances, technologies, and culture around them have changed. In this way, Daptone’s preference for antiquated technology and analog tape, commitment to the virtues of tangible mediums like vinyl records, and penchant for spontaneous live performances

are driven by an anxiety that American music is being irretrievably compromised by the seductions of digital technology. These choices, according to the label's spokespersons, are worth the sacrifice of technology's conveniences because they force the musician to be a craftsman working within defined parameters. When musicians are no longer confined to the limits of process—limits necessarily eliminated when music can be digitally manipulated on a whim—there ceases to be anything soulful about contemporary music.

These anxieties are not limited, however, simply to the recording process. Daptone perceives digital technology to carry with it an entire logic that disgraces not only the process of recording music, but also the style and aesthetics of the performers themselves. In this sense, digital technology becomes a corrosive and all-encompassing logic that threatens the future of “authentic” music writ large. It is soul music's job, in the view of Daptone performers and executives, to remedy the situation through a counteracting and defiant narrative that is simultaneously preservationist and progressive, traditional and countercultural. All of this plays to the backdrop of a racial history that constantly frames Daptone's choices in ways that blunt the forcefulness of their critiques about style, aesthetics, authenticity, and musical “progress.” In other words, Daptone can never escape soul music's legacy of essentialist assumptions about race and the sometimes real, sometimes imagined animosity between whites and blacks as it has played out in the history of the soul genre.

This is not to suggest that Daptone is always viewed so harshly. In fact, it is often viewed quite positively, but it does suggest that genres of music with such a checkered racial history are necessarily constrained by the legacies of their predecessors—legacies that are so often products of selective remembrance and received conventional wisdom. This sort of careful vigilance towards racial tensions is to be welcomed given soul's legacy, but it also must be understood as a

sometimes misguided critical constraint and a terministic screen that is too easily deferred to when issues of controversy present themselves in contemporary soul music. Genre, context, popular narrative, and the commentaries of media analysts all contribute to critiques over race that are sometimes focused in the wrong places. The politics of authenticity now reveal themselves differently, and critics who can only frame Daptone's music as an episode in colonizing, exploitation, and crass marketing do so because they have neglected to ever carefully consider present circumstances and, moreover, how the terms we use to characterize racial critique in contemporary soul music are far more ambiguous than one might perceive.

Contemporary soul's questions of authenticity, on the contrary, play out in the cutting of analog tape, the invited crack and strain of vocal imperfection, and those ambiguous intangibles that, I argue, have always been soul's metrics of authenticity—does it groove? How does it “feel?”

In this way, contemporary soul music does not attempt to speak for a generation, reveal the spirit of a people, overtly critique processes of marginalization, or engage in any of the political battles that characterized classic soul music of 1960s America. It is not responding to a Civil Rights crisis, heated racial animosities, or a culture rupturing at the seams. It is, however, expressing a politics that foregrounds different concerns that speak to a diverse set of fears and apprehensions, anxieties and frustrations, some of them with racial implications and some of them without. It is for these reasons that Daptone Records makes for an ideal case study in the pursuit of a more nuanced understanding of the politics of authenticity in American popular music culture.

In this chapter, I illuminate Daptone's politics of authenticity by demonstrating how their critiques of American musical culture are responding to perceived anxieties specifically related to notions of technological progress and authentic musicianship. In doing so, I observe how these

critiques are often framed racially, and how these frames are often informed by a narrative history of soul music that I have shown to be dubious in its veracity. In this way, I elucidate Daptone's always conflicted relationship with the legacy of the soul music it so cherishes and esteems. Such an analysis reveals the rhetorical difficulty of revivalist musical cultures to reconcile their past and present, especially when those past circumstances are perceived to be concomitant with the music that blossomed during those circumstances. In fact, Mark Anthony Neal (1999) goes as far as to suggest that "soul's singular role was a conduit for political expression" during the Civil Rights and Black Power eras (p. 31). Nelson George (2004) and Neal (2002) have even written entire books about the "post-soul" years of the mid-1970s and 1980s to suggest that soul's popularly understood expressions cannot be differentiated from the political circumstances of 1960s and early 1970s America. To George, "soul" as a cultural practice, commodity, and expression of black authenticity, fizzled away sometime around 1975 (pp. vi-viii). How, then, is one to make sense of soul's current ascendancy when all of soul's last vestiges are perceived to have disappeared from the American consciousness 40 years ago? As Sharon Jones has defiantly stated, "My next goal is for people to recognize that soul music is now. Soul music did not die in '69 and '70" (Sundermann, 2014).

In the service of answering this chapter's central questions, I use artist interviews, song lyrics, newspaper and magazine profiles, and personal correspondence as my objects of analysis. This chapter proceeds in three parts: first I describe and critique Daptone's commitment to analog recording techniques, showing how they are rooted in a contemporary anxiety about recording technologies that dishonor authentic musicianship; second, I analyze the authenticity-through-imperfection narrative as it plays out in discussions of the performers' physical appearances and personal stylistic choices; finally, I conclude by setting Daptone's aesthetic and

rhetorical choices to the backdrop of contemporary contexts, paying particularly close attention to how the complexity of their choices allow for a complicated critique that reinvigorates debates over authenticity in contemporary music.

Daptone and Sonic Imperfection

As noted, Daptone performers use the theme of imperfection as a corrective to the perceived inauthenticity of digital recording techniques. This theme of imperfection becomes manifest in two different ways. First, the virtues of imperfection are championed for their ability to touch the senses in ways that have been lost in the age of digital recording and in-studio vocal trickery. Second, the benefits of imperfection are reinforced in the appearances of Daptone performers and even of their disheveled recording studio. I begin with the first way that imperfection is expressed.

Media scholar Jose van Dijck (2006) argues that, “The ability of digital recording techniques to meticulously recapture a worn out recording and reproduce its exact poor auditory quality may offer only partial solace to a cultural yearning” (p. 366). Van Dijck suggests that even the easy manipulation made possible by digital technologies cannot effectively recreate the cherished imperfections of vinyl. Writing on pop music and authenticity, Simon Frith (2007) uses folk music of the 1960s as a case study in suggesting that, in that particular scene, technological advancement was viewed as antithetical to nature, community, and even to art itself (pp. 78-80). Frith’s analysis focuses on how technological advancement is viewed as both a progressive advancement by some, and also as a betrayal of a truer sound by others. Frith is concerned with how styles change through processes of cooptation brought on by technological modification.

What is absent from this analysis and others, however, is an understanding of how simulative recreation of a bygone era is itself an expression of authenticity. The imperfections can themselves be recreated, and Daptone Records has derived part of its organizational identity through such recreations. The always difficult-to-please music blog *Pitchfork* wrote that the Dap-Kings' music "is an affirmation of the validity of working in specific styles, even ones most people stopped exploring decades ago," further adding that their songs "actually capture the sonic character of the era" (Tangari, 2010). *Pitchfork* acknowledges the novel quality of Daptone's strict allegiances but nevertheless accepts the authenticity of its sonic replication. In this sense, Daptone's replication refers to the sonic character of the era, but its replication is such a perfect description that it becomes indistinguishable from the era from which it derives its inspiration.

What is most important in the *Pitchfork* review is the way that soul music is equated with a certain era, and moreover, with the type of character associations that mark that era. This point is confirmed in several media reports where Daptone artists articulate how soul music is particularly suited to recapturing moods and feelings lost in more perfected styles of music. As Roth states bluntly, "show me a computer that sounds as good as a tape machine and I'll use it" (Daley, 2008). In an interview for *Sound on Sound*, Roth states that one of the things he's learned is that "sometimes mistakes are what make a track sound great. Music should not be perfect or correct" (Daley, 2008). He adds that he listens for "where the horns bite and the crackle of distortion on the vocal" when studying the era that he is trying to recapture (Daley, 2008). Such a commitment inspired Roth to write an entire treatise (titled "Shitty is Pretty") in the early 2000s espousing his preferences for cheap equipment and analog recording. He states that digital recording can "suck shit from my ass" and urges readers to "forget everything you learned about

how ‘professional’ recordings are made and come raw with it.” The entire document is aimed at producing the exact sound of “deep funk” records from the 1970s. While Roth has backed off of some of these comments in recent years, he still remains committed to their chief tenets. In Saki Knafo’s 2008 *New York Times Magazine* article, he writes that “Roth shuns digital devices, stubbornly insisting on the superiority of unwieldy, old-fashioned analog equipment, like a reel-to-reel eight-track tape machine manufactured by Ampex, a company that last produced that particular model in 1971.” Moreover, this perceived fixation with the old-fashioned is combined with a sense that past performers were true and authentic inasmuch as they recognized the limits of the processes under which they were operating. Technological progress, by way of digital recording technologies, has effectively leveled the playing field among all musicians regardless of their musical skillset. Instead of recording under the limits imposed by the analog recording process, almost anyone, from an amateur to the most seasoned performer, could arrive at sounds and textures that sounded similar. Roth and Daptone’s logic equates musical dexterity and soulful authenticity with “liveness,” feeling, sensation, danger, and difficulty. In the same ways that soul music’s endurance and force comes through the “straining at the boundaries” of the human voice, authenticity in recorded sound likewise requires a strain, a fastidious adherence to cutting tape and splicing sounds that recognizes and champions the humanity in imperfection. As Roth explains:

When I’m in a studio having an endless amount of options and an endless amount of control over every note and where it sits, is not a good thing for me because what it takes out of my process, it takes out a lot of the commitment, it takes out the spontaneity, it takes a lot of the craftsmanship of it, the competency of it, the idea of knowing your craft as an engineer, and as an arranger . . . It’s just a different process. I think spontaneity is a huge part of it, and it’s tied into the authenticity” (personal communication, March 15, 2014).

According to Roth, those using digital techniques, “sitting in their basement somewhere, one note at a time, at a computer” are operating from a “different mindset” than his own (Cridlin, 2011). “There’s no danger there. You’re not on the edge of anything,” he says. “To a certain point, they’re missing the point of all that technology in the first place, which is to try to make people feel something, you know? When you start losing out on the live-ness of a performance, you’re not really helping it” (personal communication). In this sense Roth is suggesting an ethos that refuses to differentiate between live performance and studio performance; the passions, emotions, and spontaneous bursts of exaltation absolutely must carry from the stage into the studio and back again. “There’s no undo when you’re onstage. Whatever you play is what everyone’s going to hear. That’s what’s happening. It’s that sense, that what you do is what’s happening, that makes the hair come up on the back of your neck when you’re in the studio” (personal communication, March 15, 2014).

This narrative of championed imperfection extends to the recording studio itself, Daptone’s House of Soul. The studio is often depicted as a decidedly rugged and purposely gritty place. The recording equipment looks broken-down and minimalist, and the studio is described as “one of the last holdouts against the decades-long gentrification” of the Bushwick neighborhood where it resides (Perry, 2012). Writing in the *New Individualist*, Sarah Perry’s 2012 feature story echoes these statements, making the House of Soul an integral part of Daptone’s aesthetic presentation. In discussing the studio, Perry writes that “the window might be cracked, dirt-smearred and stained, the awning hanging at an awkward angle. But those voices, they’re coming from a deep place, and they have an uncanny power to move, captivate, and transform.” In making the connections between the “imperfect” recording studio and the feelings they evoke, Perry concludes that the voices captured in the House of Soul “are some of the only

true ones left in the music business.” In this sense, Daptone’s seemingly antiquated recording studio is able to capture the “liveness” of a live performance, and therefore, those fleeting moments that make one’s hair stand on end.

The connections being drawn are obvious. The imperfect, the cheap, and the embodied are far superior in their capacity to evoke “real” sensation and “authentic” feeling than overly technologized, digital recordings. Daptone co-owner Neal Sugarman states this even more unequivocally in arguing that if a record “doesn’t touch the senses, it doesn’t work. It has to feel natural. There’s a certain organic aspect of the record that makes soul recordings from that time—they breathe a certain way. It makes us want to keep making them this way because no one else is” (Perry, 2012). Notice how Sugarman equates “soul recordings from that time” with the methods of recording that Daptone embraces. Sugarman further states that singers at Daptone are not performing “technical gymnastics in the studio” and that all of the Daptone musicians “have that certain something you can’t put your finger on, but you can *feel*” (my emphasis, Perry, 2012).

In these comments, Daptone performers are suggesting these recording methods are instrumental factors in their flourishing as a label. Analog production techniques consistent with the late 1960s are thereby framed as antecedent to the ability to “feel.” Drawing such close connections between aesthetic imperfection, affective response, and a specific historical era suggests Daptone’s position in contemporary music culture is a conflicted one. Its objections to being labeled a nostalgia act or pioneers of soul revivalism become difficult to accept once their music is associated with recording techniques that were cutting-edge 45 years ago. This has led some, such as *Boston Globe* and WNYC music critic Siddhartha Mitter, to draw explicit ties between the politics of the Civil Rights era and Daptone’s recording preferences: “To me the

problem is that that (original soul) music was made in a social and political context. It was race music. It was music of struggle. It was music that took place in a particular context in America. I worry about the separation between that context and the appreciation that a whole new audience has for it now” (Schaefer, 2010). Mitter’s critique comes in direct response to interviewer John Schaefer’s suggestion that Daptone’s recording preferences, noticeably less “perfect” than digital recordings, carry with them suggestions of political critique. Mitter’s argument that Daptone’s audience is unable to draw parallels between the sound of Daptone’s records and the social and political conditions of their source material once again foregrounds the difficulties that contemporary soul music has in freeing itself from the shadows of its predecessors. It also places an unusually high and, I argue, completely unnecessary burden on contemporary audiences to view their preferences in music as part of a broader commentary about the history of race politics over the last half-century.

In this sense, Daptone’s recording preferences, meant as a critique of the recording industry’s preference for mass-marketed, mass-consumed music scrubbed of its impurities instead becomes an invitation for critics to level charges of racial exploitation at Daptone Records. In this sense, Daptone’s narrative of aesthetic imperfection gets interpreted under evaluative criteria located in soul music of the 1960s. Issues of race, soul, context, and authenticity are not limited to the critiques of Mitter and Wang, however. Daptone performers are asked repeatedly to offer opinions on the racial component of their music in the vast majority of interviews they grant. This is a phenomenon that clearly confuses the artists themselves, who have stated that these issues are only brought up by journalists and are rarely discussed anywhere else (Knafo, 2008). Jones is often asked to comment on the racial composition of her mostly white audience, and Gabriel Roth cannot escape questions about what it means to be a white

musician playing soul music. These are valid, well-meaning questions, but these performers often answer them in ways that offer more nuanced critiques of racial politics and musical authenticity than those suggested by the interviewers. Using the same lines of argument that inform their critiques of digital recording techniques, the logics of authenticity used by Daptone are extended into questions about the physical appearances of the performers themselves. The dirty, the unrefined, the funky, the groovy, the sweaty, and the shitty therefore become aesthetic values with utility that extends to physical attributes, in addition to descriptions of the sonic character of the music itself. Shitty just doesn't sound pretty, it also looks pretty too. Such an extension of the authenticity-through-imperfection thesis thus provides an opening for Daptone's performers' critique assumptions about race, beauty, and authenticity while resisting the temptation to be goaded into defensive stances by their interviewers and critics. Rather than falling into nostalgic platitudes about soul music's heyday, Daptone performers have used the richness of soul's legacy as a regenerating resource of courage, uplift, and critique that amends and adapts those of the Civil Rights era to accommodate new problems, new scenes, new actors, and new frustrations. While some might argue that "the more we fetishize what Daptone is doing, the more we are looking at black music and making it non-threatening," I suggest in the following section that what it means to be "threatening" is itself wrought with ambiguity and racial implications (Schaefer, 2010). Given soul and rock n' roll's history of viewing black performers as less than human, morally deleterious, and animated by voracious sexual appetite, to suggest that Daptone is non-threatening might be welcomed as a symptom of racial progress (Frith, 1996, pp. 126-127). What Mitter is suggesting, however, is that Daptone is safe, conservative, preservationist, and, because of the racial composition of its audience and performers, not capable of mounting any sort of defiant political message. In this section, I argue

that the extension of the shitty-is-pretty ethic serves as a way for Daptone performers, most notably Sharon Jones, to critique assumptions about what counts as “authentic” beauty.

Where’s the Pool for the Ugly People?

As noted above, the connections between feeling and imperfection extend beyond Daptone’s rigid adherence to analog recording. It extends to the bodies of the performers themselves. This makes sense as an appropriate rhetorical choice given the way that the body’s materiality is thought to be compromised when encountering digital technologies. As Brummett (2003) argues, such technology “makes linkages among subjects and between subjects and texts more important than their physical grounding in the body, extends the body into cyberspace where physicality loses meaning, and allows the subject to forget its materiality” (p. 77). This type of reasoning ensures continuity between the recording techniques (emphasizing materiality and process over digital manipulation) and the self-perpetuated assertions of bodily imperfection that certify Daptone performers as deeply in-tune with their own embodied presence. This comes across repeatedly in interviews.

In a *New York Times Magazine* article Roth argues that a “series of technological innovations—the synthesizer, the CD, the laptop—have emboldened major labels like Sony and Atlantic to replace skilled musicians with microchips, resulting in an inferior product ...” (Knafo, 2008). Roth further argues that in order to compensate for the inferior product, labels have begun “dumping more and more money into cynical marketing schemes—in Roth’s words, ‘Faster ways to get it, cheaper ways to get it, ways to give you more of it, ways to give it to you with a can of Coke, ways to give it to you with artificial breasts and a blond hair-job.’” In a 2011 interview with *Mother Jones* magazine, Jones is characteristically blunt in her assessment of what it is that Daptone opposes: “That’s what’s selling. The girls gotta be half-naked, half-

exposed. They gotta be tall, light-skinned, and beautiful lookin' ... I'm lookin' at these Disney characters, these young girls coming out looking like, excuse my language, little whores” (Kumeh, 2011). Roth reinforces Jones’ assessment. Saki Knafo’s *New York Times Magazine* profile describes an incident with Roth in Hollywood, which Roth redubbed “Hollyweird:” “I watched him [Roth] stroll out to the pool, take one look at the surgically enhanced bodies darkening in the sun and ponder, dryly, ‘Where’s the pool with the ugly people?’” (Knafo, 2008).

These ideals are so strongly held that even when mainstream success came calling, Roth was resistant. The Dap-Kings backed up singer Amy Winehouse on her breakthrough 2007 release *Back in Black* which ended up selling 10 million copies. For his work on that album, Roth won a production Grammy. Instead of embracing the opportunity to support the star, Roth reluctantly accepted only after considerable prodding. He initially declined the offer, calling Winehouse’s music “too angsty and self-involved” (Knafo, 2008). In the *New York Magazine* article, Saki Knafo states that Roth “displayed the platinum record in the studio’s decrepit downstairs bathroom, propped up against the wall, a few inches from the toilet” (Knafo, 2008). Likewise, Jones sarcastically referred to Winehouse as “Amy what’s-her-name” and called her a “mixed blessing” (Sisario, 2007). The Winehouse incident tested the durability of the Daptone ideals. The ideals bent, reluctantly, but never completely broke. Winehouse was viewed unsympathetically, as too concerned with the cultivation of image even though the band recognized her considerable talents (Ryzik, 2010). In other words, not real enough.

In a *New York Times* interview, Jones is asked why she only listens to old music. Her response reiterates the same sentiment: “Because, look at me! The new stuff out here, just after a while they don’t make any sense. It all sounds the same. The new stuff don’t hold my attention”

(Ryzik, 2010). The implication, especially in Jones' immediate response, is that new music is artificial, inexorably associated with an inflated image to which she does not identify. While musicians with comparable sentiments would likely make similar remarks, the degree to which Jones & the Dap-Kings assert their opposition is striking. Moreover, it is striking just how this modesty itself is a designed affectation—a posture adopted to secure the heart and soul of the era of music being revived. As a result of this stylistic choice, Sharon Jones & the Dap-Kings celebrate humility, in dress, style, purpose, and aesthetics, as a signifier of authenticity.

In the *New York Magazine* profile, Knafo writes that Jones “does not resemble most people’s idea of a pop star, a fact in which she takes obvious pride ... she likes to declare that she was rejected by the mainstream music industry because she was deemed ‘too short, too fat, too black’ and ... ‘too old’” (Knafo, 2008, p. MM38). This “too short, too fat, too black, too old” motif is one that shows up in several other profile stories, including the *Mother Jones* interview, and interviews with *Spinner.com*, *The Pitch*, the *Miami New Times*, *Encore Magazine*, NPR, and even an interview with Oprah Winfrey. In *Mother Jones*, Jones states that “I didn't have the looks. This Sony guy told me I was too black, too fat, too short, and too old. Told me to go and bleach my skin. Told me to step in the background and just stay back” (Kumeh, 2011).

Almost as ubiquitous as the “too fat” quote is the narrative that accompanies Jones in the vast majority of press accounts. Jones was a former Rikers Island prison guard, an uncredited back-up singer in the 1980s, rejected repeatedly by industry executives in the 1990s, and not able to move out of the New York City housing projects until the middle of 2011 (Ayers, 2010). Jones did not grow up privileged. In a *Village Voice* profile, Michael Ayers describes her upbringing: “The soul singer's mother raised her and five other kids, cousins included, while working low-wage housecleaning and assembly-line jobs, a fate that Jones herself once seemed

resigned to” (Ayers, 2010). In this way, Jones’ narrative and outspoken defiance coincide. In previous eras her hardscrabble tale would have gone unacknowledged, her singing abilities forever uncovered as she lived the “resigned to” life. The reader gets the sense in many of these articles that the culture only recently has come around to accepting Jones and Daptone. Sugarman suggested in a *Village Voice* interview that “we’ve proved that what we’re doing has a place in modern times” (Ayers, 2010). In other words, in another cultural moment Jones’ narrative might not resound as profoundly, her unfitness proven to be a true liability in times where inauthenticity was normalized and soul music struggled to remain relevant. Jones’ appearance and Daptone’s aesthetic offered a corrective.

This narrative inevitably works itself into the lyrics of the songs themselves, such as “Humble Me” from Jones’ 2007 release *100 Days, 100 Nights*. In an interview on NPR’s *Fresh Air*, Jones described the song this way: “I’m always saying I’m so thankful for what God gave me ... if you see me up higher than everyone else, then bring me down and let me know I’m not ... That song is just about me being humble for my blessings” (Gross, 2010). Over the top of guitarist Binky Griptite’s understated guitar, Jones sings, “When I start talking down like I’m hovering above / like I’m made of something better oh then what you’re made of / and when you hear me asking for all kinds of fancy things / ... don’t be afraid to humble me / Don’t let me forget who I am” (Roth, 2007). Jones sets herself in relief from the over-exposed pop stars of the age by recasting herself as actively pursuing modesty and even asking others to do it for her when she might transgress. The self-regulating principle so lacking in modern pop music is turned into an attribute, a blessing with spiritual implications.

As a black woman this principle takes on added cultural significance, especially in light of recent trends in what Roopali Mukherjee (2006) describes as the “ghetto fabulous” aesthetic in

American popular culture (p. 599). Mukherjee argues that contemporary aesthetics have been marked by an influx in “audacious spectacle as movie stars, pop icons, and sports figures alike flaunt these markers of economic success, new signifiers of the American Dream” (p. 600). Similarly, Dubrofsky & Hardy (2008) argue that popular culture depictions of black women often only authenticate them as “real black women” when they are “authentically ghetto”—a characteristic marked by “aggression and confrontation” (p. 377). Mukherjee adds that this trend has been particularly characteristic of black celebrities who “routinely make stylized proclamations of their blackness through elaborate performances of bling in music videos, on the red carpet, and in the movies” (p. 600). The “ghetto fabulous aesthetic” marked by “bling” and “uber-capitalistic tendencies” produces what Mukherjee calls a “pathological black consumerism” that marks the “post-soul” era (p. 601, 607).

Jones’ music and aesthetic and lyrical choices even more defiantly cast her as someone interested in reclaiming the “soul” and fighting against the audaciousness of the “post-soul” (p. 601). Jones sings about tempering impulses toward consumerism. She does not want “fancy things” as she sings in “Humble Me,” which is a point she goes out of her way to make in the *Fresh Air* interview (Gross, 2010). Before finally getting a wardrobe specialist, Jones wore hand-me-down vintage dresses onstage, and she acknowledges that her onstage dancing shoes were bought at Payless (Ryzik, 2010). Jones’ appearances hereby set her apart from ghetto fabulousness by embracing the perceived imperfection of her own body without the cover of the bling and the glam of her contemporaries. Jones’ appeal to humility and attempts to evade the trappings of the commercial music industry are likewise reiterated by Roth, who targets his anger at contemporary hip-hop music. “It’s [modern “black” music] dominated by corporations and you talk about non-threatening. I mean, even if you’re talking about hip-hop or whatever, it’s

pretty awful gangster shit. It's a cross between awful capitalist shit and awful gangster shit. I mean, it's, it's *awful*. It's really awful. The industry's awful. The music's awful" (personal communication, March 15, 2014, his emphasis).

These rhetorical choices, and Jones' constant, morally righteous proclamations, give the appearance that Roth and Jones are especially grounded figures carefully attuned to the requirements of the genre they have chosen. Such an orientation is energized by the spiritual underpinnings of traditional, gospel-inspired soul music. In his exhaustive *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race, & the Soul of America*, Craig Hansen Werner (1998) argues that the sites of worship that influenced soul music valued "religious ecstasy more highly than polished phrasing or perfect pitch" (p. 5). Imperfection, especially the type that suggests humility, thereby takes on a spiritual resonance consistent with soul's sanctified origins. Further, these moments of imperfect performance "transformed centuries of bitter hardship into moments of pure connection—with self, community, and the soul-deep presence of the Lord" (Werner, 1998, p. 5). The spiritual undercurrent of soul music is thus one that evokes a type of communion possible only as a result of the imperfections, both in style and sound, that in the logic of Daptone Records, are what make us human. The fact that Daptone performers champion these affectations is thus a testament to the durability of soul music as a conditioned cultural response to anxieties of the present. Further, it is another symptom of the how exacting Daptone is in its allegiances to 1960s-era soul music. Again, however, the fact that the Daptone's response is so meticulous in its recreation merely suggests that the only recourse from the logics of a digitized, "perfected" culture, the loss of embodied material presence, is to retreat into a different type of simulation—one that is simply a copy of something else. As Greg Dickinson (1997) argues in his discussion of authenticity and identity, "identity is the creative performance of memory"

(Dickinson, 1997, p. 5). In this sense, Daptone's revival of the practices of classic soul music performs processes of identity creation through the activation of very specific memories tied to very specific affective responses. In the following concluding section I describe the implications of such a phenomenon while also rendering judgment on the effectiveness of Daptone's cultural critique.

Conclusion

As I have argued, the ascendance of the Daptone label arises as a response to perceived degeneracy in popular music aesthetics, as musicians have been increasingly unwilling to succumb to the perceived trappings of digital technologies. Daptone positions itself as authentic through its championing of outmoded recording techniques, and their insistent assertions that the virtues of imperfection are the only virtues through which "real" feeling can be accessed. The authentic is the imperfect, and that imperfection is made manifest in the bodies of the performers, the sound of the records, and even the recording studio itself.

Daptone's oppositional posture has proven to be culturally persuasive and suggests that ultimately the only recourse to the encroachment of this digitization is to fall back into a pattern of recreation—to, in effect, simulate the style, music, and recording techniques of a long-forgotten era. Some might view this as an exercise in vicariousness and indicative of a type of defeatism. Its aesthetics and style might be viewed as preservationist and ultimately regressive because its commitments to approximation leave it very little room to wiggle free from the constraints of the style they have chosen to reimagine. While there could be very good reason to be anxious about the ease with which music can be manipulated through digital technologies, Daptone's retreat into historical facsimile, so goes the argument, does not seem up to the task—

their critique blunted by an insistence on meticulously recreating all of the imperfections, all of the sounds, and all of the crackles and pops that made 1960s soul music feel more authentic.

However, as I have shown, Daptone's relationship to the past, a past so turbulent, misunderstood, yet also beautiful and affecting, resists easy efforts to classify it as non-threatening, traditionalist, opportunistic, and even exploitative. It is important to realize, I argue, that soul is a genre of *music*, and categories of music, especially those with the resilience of soul music, adapt and move beyond constraints of context, changes in moods, and shifts in racial perceptions. For these reasons, I am deeply skeptical of histories of soul music and the Civil Rights Movement, such as Mark Anthony Neal's (1999) *What The Music Said* (and countless others), that routinely overstate the overt political connections between soul music and the Civil Rights Movement. In historian Brian Ward's (1998) careful and comprehensive *Just My Soul Responding*, he argues that in most soul music histories, "overt references to, and advocacy of, the civil rights struggle, or gritty depictions of the black social and economic predicament, or rousing calls for black pride and resistance, have routinely been presented as the principal site and source of [soul] music's multiple meanings" (p. 290). Besides this oversight, Ward also provides ample evidence that these histories also tend to "exaggerate the extent of personal involvement in, or tangible support for, organized black protest by the heroes and heroines of soul" (p. 290). In fact, Ward goes as far as to argue that historians of soul have found it nearly impossible to not draw dubious "direct linkages" between soul music performers and organized black protest (p. 291).

It is, I argue, this conventional narrative about soul music, one that was complicated in chapter 2 that informs the attitudes and predispositions of those commentators who pass judgment on Daptone Records. In this sense, any sort of acknowledgment that soul music exists

in the 21st century is accompanied by a reflexive need to narrow the possibilities for political critique to a narrow set of options—options that are intelligible only in reference to the sociopolitical context of 1960s America. This has clearly frustrated the performers. As Roth states, “It’s a different context now, but it doesn’t necessarily have to do with being black and identifying with black people. It has to do with being real, and Sharon being her age and being a cancer survivor and not having the look, or the feel, or the sound of the people that are supposed to make it, and making it despite that, that’s what people identify with” (personal communication).

Further, soul music’s legacy seems to overburden it in ways that do not afflict other genres of music. While genres like folk and country music, as Richard Peterson (1997) persuasively argues, continue to debate issues of authenticity, there is not the suggestion that aesthetic authenticity and contextual circumstance must be irrevocably linked. For example, it seems intuitive to suggest that one can still play folk music “authentically” without having to have lived during the Dust Bowl. Playing soul music authentically, however, is a time-sensitive practice, and no amount of aesthetic replication can advance an authentic sound outside the circumstances of entrenched racial struggle.

It is for these reasons that interviewers constantly ask Sharon Jones about her mostly white audience and badger Gabriel Roth about his perceived fetishization of 1960s soul music. By doing this, critics have prematurely asserted the death of soul music and the rise of a nebulously defined era of post-soul aesthetics. What I have argued in this chapter is that Daptone Records has chosen to resist these pronouncements by appropriating aspects of 1960s soul music, namely its aesthetic commitments and stylistic requirements, and using them as resources of

resistance against the perceived encroachments and debasements of digital recording technology and perfected bodily image. Unlike punk rock, which Dick Hebdige (1979) describes in his influential *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* as engaging in revolt by “being revolting,” Daptone is not turning to the “ugly” as a declaration of dispiriting nihilism (p. 106). Instead, Daptone tries to proclaim its authenticity through humility, deference, good manners, the eschewal of brashness, and a dogged commitment to the welcomed dangers of spontaneity, “liveness,” and the invited constraints of analog recording.

I do not mean to suggest, however, that Daptone Records is not concerned with the racial legacy of soul music, nor am I at all trying to argue that Daptone’s success is an indication of a post-racial America. One need not look farther than Sharon Jones repeated comments about being “too black” for some industry executives and her refusal to bleach her skin to appear more white to reject any claims of a post-racial America. As Oliver Wang (2012) argues, it is always important that one not forget that “R&B’s popularity through the decades has been possible *despite* the pernicious legacies of American race relations, not in the absence or erasure of them” (p. 205, his emphasis). Daptone is not trying to erase soul music’s legacy, they are merely trying to establish the resiliency of soul as a conditioned cultural response to perceptions of debasement, disillusionment, and corrosive materialism that characterize contemporary American music culture. Daptone’s critiques are not perfect, and it would be naïve to assume that authenticity-through-imperfection is not also the product of savvy marketing, but Daptone’s reclamation of the spirit of soul, in all its flawed grandeur, suggests a music listening audience coming to accept and embrace a distinctly American art form all over again.

Soul music's legacy provides the backdrop for another record label concerned with resurrecting vintage sounds. Chicago's Numero Group archival record label, unlike Daptone Records, collects and repackages old music (primarily from the 1960s and early 1970s) from long-forgotten soul singers as part of its Eccentric Soul line of releases. While Daptone Records embraces soul music's legacy as an opportunity to play contemporary music in vintage styles with specific aesthetics, Numero Group's interest in re-releasing music originally recorded decades ago indicates a sense of hopelessness in contemporary sounds. To the Numero Group, mining the talents of the forgotten becomes the only place that one can go to find authentic sounds. In this sense, the Numero Group sees authenticity as a finite resource, something that must be cherished, respected, and held in contrast to the banality of contemporary music, even contemporary music that brandishes its "independent" credentials. In the following chapter I examine Numero Group's preservationist narrative and examine its hopelessness as symptomatic of broader concerns about the way modern music audiences relate to their music. If Daptone is trying to insist on soul music's contemporary relevancy, the Numero Group is suggesting that it is relevant insofar as it looks backward to the past, preserves that past, and cherishes that past as a phenomenon unlikely to ever be repeated.

Chapter 4: A Nostalgic Mythology

“Looking back over my false dreams that I once knew. Wondering why my dreams never came true. Is it because I’m black? Somebody tell me, what can I do? Something is holding me back. Is it because I’m black?”

--Syl Johnson – “Is it Because I’m Black”

These epigraphic words are sung over a few understated minor chords on a 1970 soul album called *Is It Because I’m Black*, a record whose foreboding presence is given added gravity by the uncompromising bitterness and mournful lamentations of its singer, Syl Johnson. The soul singer, whose previous output was ribald and playful, dizzy with funk and brimming with an assured confidence, had suddenly become vulnerable, resentful, and defeated. It was a shift that characterized the era of soul—an era forever immortalized by Marvin Gaye’s 1971 release, *What’s Going On?*, an album wrought with anguished themes of racism, urban poverty, environmental destruction, and global war that were made to sound beautiful through Gaye’s voice, which seemed to float above all of the “hang-ups, letdowns, bad breaks, [and] setbacks” that the world was offering him (Gaye & Nyx, 1971). Gaye’s record is considered one of the greatest recordings in the history of American popular music while Johnson’s release, predating Gaye by one year and considered to be the first black concept record, never achieved much more than marginal acclaim and the admiration of collectors (Munro, 2010). Johnson’s career, like the album, languished, and the singer developed a fervent distaste for the music industry’s predatory practices, racial prejudices, and utter failure to recognize his considerable, if self-proclaimed, genius (Jarnow, 2011).

Soul music, like any other genre of music or creative enterprise, is full of almost-weres, never-weres, has-beens and cult heroes, but few of these musicians ever get a second chance, a revival, a restoration, a polishing-off. They rarely reemerge from the dustbins for a second stab at relevance and a chance to reimagine their own troubled history. Syl Johnson is one of these rare musicians thanks to the work of the Numero Group, an archival record label based in Chicago. In 2010 the label released a four-disc, six-LP box set of Johnson's music called *Complete Mythology*, earning the label two Grammy nominations and an unexpected career revival for Johnson. Most notable in the box set were the 35,000-word liner notes, which documented Johnson's "complete mythology" from rhythm and blues guitarist to a 1980s soul music burnout. The notes were meticulously researched and aimed to try to separate fact from fiction in Johnson's often convoluted life narrative. The liner notes earned one Grammy nomination for label co-founder Ken Shipley, who penned the notes, and vaulted Johnson into the media limelight. Once jilted, weary, and hopeless, the soul singer whose voice strained and nearly cracked apart with indignation while wondering "Is It Because I'm Black?" finally felt compensated monetarily and spiritually—his life's work given the loving dedication and adoring admiration he felt he always deserved.

So what, exactly, can account for both Johnson's and the Numero Group's impractical success? Firstly, part of this success can be attributed to the label's ability to locate cultural artifacts worthy of being objects of nostalgic reclamation. What makes these artifacts, like the music of Syl Johnson, worthy of reclamation is not purely their artistic merits; rather, the stories of hardships, setbacks, and false starts that accompany these repackaged and reissued records play a central role. In this sense, Johnson's story of personal redemption is anchored in an obligation to correct the historical record—to confer *authentic* status to Johnson by attributing

his obscurity to bad luck, bad circumstances, and the racist music industry of the Civil Rights era. While the label is certainly not nostalgic for the racist era that they document, the music of that time, according to their logic, is so rich with character and soul that it remains the only place left to turn for an authentic sound. As Svetlana Boym (2001) argues, “the nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition” (p. xv). An undercurrent of nostalgic longing undergirds Numero’s mission and the mission of its founders—Ken Shipley, Tom Lunt, and Rob Sevier—nostalgics who are nostalgic for a period of music that none of them were actually alive to experience with any conscious memory.

It may seem curious to suggest that one is nostalgic for a period of time for which she has no conscious memory. However, as sociologist Janelle Wilson (2005) makes clear, the commercialization of nostalgic appeals in popular culture assures that “even those of us who have not experienced a particular decade . . . may find ourselves looking back to those eras with a fondness” (p. 31). As a result, one need not attach nostalgic longing to actually-experienced memories. Nostalgia might also be animated by a fantasy for an imagined past, a process that Tom Vanderbilt (1994) has referred to as “displaced nostalgia” (pp. 131-132). Wilson has argued that displaced nostalgia is associated with a “retreat to a more simple and free time” and presented as “a commentary on life in the present” (pp. 100-101). Such displaced nostalgia characterizes Numero’s preoccupation with the music—and the stories—of singers like Syl Johnson.

In this way, Numero’s institutional ethos casts suspicion on the fleeting and transitory shifts in taste that accompany modern sounds. The logic is wholly consistent with that of

Daptone Records, so much so that Daptone and Numero often work in association with one another, promoting each other's releases and sometimes even sharing talent. Because of this, their audiences overlap in their shared affinity for vinyl records and throwback aesthetics. As previous chapters have suggested, both labels are seen as spearheading the contemporary soul revival, with Daptone cultivating emerging "retro" talent while Numero seeks to repackage and rediscover those musicians providing the retro performers with their inspirations. In the same way that Daptone's Gabriel Roth expresses disgust at any music made past 1972, Numero's Eccentric Soul series equally avoids contemporary sounds, insisting on novelty, obscurity, and its own perceptive taste as the principal mediators between authentic and inauthentic sounds.

Moreover, authenticity, as conceived by these two labels, is a construct attendant to the peculiar regionalisms that characterized soul music of the 1960s and early 1970s. As described in Chapter 3, Daptone's entire sonic aesthetic is one best viewed as a celebration of regional identity, with geographic and spatial curiosities manipulated with deft precision to tie together the traditional and the contemporary. The releases in Numero's Eccentric Soul series, of which Syl Johnson's *Complete Mythology* is a part, are chosen as representations of long-forgotten regional record labels, such as Kansas City's Forte label, Miami's Deep City label, and Atlanta's Tragar and Note labels. These releases, and the stories that are told through their liner notes, are narratives not just of the musicians but also of the cultural-geographic conditions within which the music rose to prominence. Numero's ethos, like that of Daptone, is one that places paramount importance on remembering the past and cherishing its adoring commitments to regional identity. However, when one develops an affinity for a particular period of time (and for the look and feel of that time), he or she also must account for how those circumstances were shaped by the oppressive racial attitudes characteristic of the time period and the regions where the music

was produced. In the case of Syl Johnson, born in 1936 in a place hardly hospitable to racial harmony—Holly Springs, Mississippi, his story is one that, according to Sevier, Lunt, and Shipley, must be preserved not just for his perceived brilliance as a musician but also because his story is so conducive to their need to provide redemptive intervention. Syl Johnson’s unique life circumstances—circumstances that pivot across various troublingly racist locales from the 1950s to the 1980s—are at risk of being forgotten forever as these musicians reach their twilight years. The Numero Group’s reclamation efforts can therefore be seen as a link between two complementary impulses within the contemporary soul revival: the commitment to contemporary authenticity, as in the case of Daptone, and the experience of nostalgic longing, which is so vital to the Numero Group’s success.

In the case of the Numero Group, those objects worthy of nostalgic longing are considered to be in finite supply as the opportunities for redemption become fewer and fewer. As Ken Shipley has stated, “people are dying and it’s like we’ve got 10 or 15 years before the last of a generation is gone” (Reynolds, 2009). This generation, according to Shipley, deserves to be recognized and mythologized because “for somebody to fail at making a record, especially being black in the late ‘60s or early ‘70s, means they put a lot more than four or five hundred dollars on the line. They put their life on the line” (Jarnow, 2011).

In this sense, Shipley’s reverence for Johnson’s generation is born out of an admiration for their sacrifice in the face of unlikely odds. Such sacrifice marks Johnson as an “authentic” performer. This process of nostalgic reclamation is not one without political implications. Wilson (2005) suggests an unmistakable link between nostalgia, authenticity, and identity politics when she suggests that projects like Numero’s “encourage a reclaiming of authentic identity among

members of groups which have historically been stigmatized and oppressed” (p. 58). Projects of reclamation, therefore, use nostalgia as a catalyst through which perceptions of authenticity become realizable. Writing in *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, Kimberly K. Smith (2000) similarly argues that nostalgia can “serve as a valuable basis for social critique,” and that such a preservationist ethic can help “counter historical narratives that misrepresent the experiences of oppressed groups, for example” (p. 523).

However, practices of nostalgia and the process of narrative reclamation, such as those at the Numero Group, are not always governed by such altruistic concern; or at the very least, they are sometimes obfuscating, reifying, and patterned by intransigent conservatism. Scholars such as Hasian (2014), Wood (2010), Von Burg & Johnson (2009), and Dickinson (1997) have all documented instances where tropes and dispositions of nostalgia have produced such outcomes, signaling that in the very least, “nostalgia is not simply a neutral description of a modern emotional quirk, but an ideologically charged construct” (Smith, 2000, p. 515).

Relatedly, there are also concerns, such as those raised by blues historian Francis Davis (1995), that such narratives privilege white experiences and perceptions of the past, even when they are trying to pay homage to black artists. As Davis laments, the “guardianship of the blues has passed from the black community to white bohemia” (p. 237). Similarly, Owen & Ehrenhaus (2010), in their examination of the film *The Green Mile*, argue that narrative features, similar to those used at Numero Group, can sometimes “demonstrate a tendency among white progressive allies of black citizens to reassert control of cultural production of meaning” (p. 149). Likewise, Kelly Madison (1999) argues that “white hero” narratives often depict black protagonists only in relation to “their immediate and relatively superficial responses to their victimization” (p. 407).

Given that Numero's leadership is all white and that Ken Shipley was the author of Numero's definitive 35,000 word retelling of Johnson's redemption story—a story full of tropes of victimhood left to Shipley to resolve—there are natural concerns about racial paternalism and entrenched narratives of white supremacy. It could be quite easy for Shipley to make his record label the hero in Johnson's renewed successes.

All of this very clearly confronts Numero Group with a confounding rhetorical problem. They must confront some of the regressive qualities of nostalgic longing while also confronting tendencies towards racial paternalism that could be implied by their reclamation projects. This requires a dexterous rhetorical response, a juggling of difficult personalities and commitments, fragments of misremembrance, and the omnipresent stain of Civil Rights-era racial abuses. Somehow, however, Numero Group has achieved an almost peerless company reputation in spite of these hurdles. In *The Guardian*, journalist Simon Reynolds regarded Numero Group with gushing praise, calling them “scrupulously ethical,” while Julian Brimmers of the *Red Bull Music Academy Magazine* described them as “the most trusted name in the world of unearthing obscure wax platters and shedding light on the overlooked heroes and heroines of music history” (Brimmers, 2014).

How exactly have Numero Group been so successful in executing such a nimble rhetorical maneuver? In the following pages, I offer an answer to this question as I also complicate Numero Group's success and resist the easy temptation to extol Numero's efforts without questioning some of the assumptions upon which they rest. Numero Group's reclamation efforts can be lauded for their intent and execution, but I argue that there is also an undercurrent of troubling defeatism in both their bleak appraisals of contemporary music and their suggestions

that authenticity can only be found in the past, that authenticity is a resource of only limited quantity to be curated with precise delicacy as a generation of more authentic artists slowly die off. The label likes to remind its audiences that there is no time to lose. In Shipley's own words, "Soul music, as I know it, is nearly dead. There's a handful of modern interpretations, Sharon Jones, Nicole Willis, etc, but if you want to see the real thing you're running out of time" (Behm, 2008).

As Shipley's suggestions indicate, the legacies of the musicians of this more authentic era, those who are the "real thing," are in dire need of preservation. The process of redeeming these legacies, the logic implies, becomes even more admiring when placed in strategic relief to a music industry perceived as impulsive and transitory. In this sense, my central thesis is that Numero Group achieves status as an authentic record label through association with a laudatory narrative of redemption. They consistently weave themselves into the stories of the performers they document, suggesting not only their competence as stewards of the hip and cool, but also as archivists deeply attuned to the sounds and styles of a more authentic, if racially-charged, era of American music. While praiseworthy, such a project also ushers in subtle, paternalistic tones that suggest these musicians are unreliable as tellers of their own stories, or even that they are incapable of telling their own stories. Moreover, Numero's insistence on narrative veracity and meticulous historical retelling functions to firmly anchor feelings of authenticity in the past—to categorize these perceptions, document them, repackage them, and settle the issue over who is an authentic musician and who is not. In other words, Numero creates an archive of authenticity that can be accessed and relived but cannot be found anywhere else other than in their archive. That archive contains some great music to be sure, but it is also troubling to think this is the only place

we can go to find authentic soul music, and moreover, that we must rely on the Numero Group to confer its authentic status.

To this point, I have laid out a number of concerns that sit at the intersection of authenticity, nostalgia, and soul music. In the remainder of this chapter I seek to unpack these expressed concerns by proceeding in the following parts: first, I engage in an analysis of Numero Group's company profile and organizational mission, paying careful attention to the ways in which their goals dovetail with contemporary trends towards archival collection and packaging; second, I provide a critique of Ken Shipley's liner notes in the Syl Johnson *Complete Mythology* box set to illuminate the ways that nostalgic longing reacts in correspondence with a sometimes paternalistic narrative retelling; finally, I conclude by suggesting implications for such renderings of nostalgia, the archive, and authenticity in soul music.

Numero Group – An Archival Record Label

As an archival record label, Numero Group specializes in both reissued albums that are out of print and previously unreleased compilations that they have hand-selected and curated. Their website boasts that “our archival main line features the most lavish packaging allowed by history” (“Numero”). Syl Johnson's story, like the Numero Group itself, functions as a centerpiece of the soul revival in contemporary American music. Along with its contemporaries at Daptone Records, Numero's series of soul reissues, dubbed *Eccentric Soul*, have brought commercial success, personal redemption, and critical accolades to soul musicians whose legacies have been lost to the vagaries of time. Their *Eccentric Soul* series “is effectively remapping the American soul diaspora,” according to its website (“Eccentric”). Moreover, the Numero Group website boasts that in “*Eccentric Soul's* alternate universe there are motley and

mishandled Motowns beyond number,” and it directs their audience to “find their stories here, retold for the first time” (“Eccentric Soul”). The flagship *Eccentric Soul* series has been especially important in contributing to the label’s economic success.

The label has turned a substantial profit using an unconventional business model that has confounded observers (McDonald, 2012). They have eschewed almost all marketing and advertising, opting instead to rely on the word-of-mouth circulation of their committed fans. They favor large, expensive, and somewhat unwieldy box sets over digital downloads or more mobile forms of distribution, and they choose to package their releases with extensive liner notes and photographs. As sociologist Oliver Wang (2012) observed in an article for NPR, Numero’s approach is “wildly impractical ... but practicality has never been Numero’s calling card. This, perhaps, has been one key to their success.”

However impractical they are perceived to be, Numero Group nevertheless is situated within a cultural milieu accommodating to such archival projects. Several scholars have commented on the centrality of the archive to contemporary understandings of memory and history. Historian Pierre Nora (1989) argues that contemporary archiving’s ascendancy has led to a corresponding devaluation of spontaneous memory (p. 12). Nora argues that, as a result of this trend, “we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally” (p. 12). The archive “obsession,” in Nora’s view, “venerates” traces of memory and aspires towards a “total preservation of the past” (p. 13). Derrida (1998) similarly argues that we are in the midst of an archive “fever,” in which the archive is given an elevated status and considered to be a demonstration of power and institutional privilege (pp. 10-12). More recently, rhetorical scholar

Bradford Vivian (2010) has argued that “archival documentation, revivals of communal heritage, and commitments to preserve memory at all costs consequently hold widespread cultural priority” (p. 4).

While this scholarship documents the archive in relation to a wide variety of sociopolitical contexts, archive fever has certainly spread to popular music. Reissue and archival labels like Rhino Records, Soul Jazz, Honest Jon, and Folkways recordings all have been successful following roughly the same model as Numero Group. As *The Guardian*'s Simon Reynolds noted, Numero Group, like Folkways, documents swaths of “vernacular music culture” (Reynolds, 2009). Labels like Soul Jazz and Folkways offer not only business competition, they function as competing persuasive forces. The similarities between these labels and Numero Group have influenced rhetorical and aesthetic choices by Shipley and others. As Reynolds noted, Soul Jazz and Numero Group “share an orientation towards genre—or scene-based compilations ... the difference between the two is the degree of obscurity, with Numero Group making Soul Jazz look positively middlebrow” (Reynolds, 2009). Numero Group has thus fashioned an ethos that cherishes the obscure, so much so that their releases were often obscure when they were *originally* released (Reynolds, 2010). These differentiations thus indicate both Numero's market savvy and the degree to which their overall rhetorical goals differ from similarly likeminded groups. They are interested in telling stories of performers that are still living, whose dues were paid in vain.

Further, as Reynolds noted, “I got a sense [after talking to Shipley] that the impulse driving Numero Group isn't just the reclamation of lost music, it's a kind of redemption, a making-right” (Reynolds, 2009). Numero Group is clearly using this distinction as a marketing

device, but it also deeply affects the narratives that accompany these box sets and reissued records. A look at the catalog of Folkways and Soul-Jazz indicates an absence of a redemption narrative, and their box-sets are not as extravagant in scope or storytelling. The releases on these “rival” labels sometimes merely compile already-established stars or are primarily focused on merely *collecting* the music rather than on repackaging it as part of a broader reclamation effort that includes media interviews and live performances. In this way, these record labels are both associated with and separate from the Numero Group—borrowing its passion for forgotten music while mostly avoiding its concern for restoring prestige and status to unnoticed performers.

This makes Numero Group’s appeal a distinctive one. It foregrounds narrative, storytelling, mythmaking, and mythbusting in ways that pay homage but also redeem—a type of living remembrance that Numero Group’s founders curate with impeccable detail. Unlike Soul-Jazz or Folkways, who rely on journalists or academics for liner note material, Numero Group’s extensive liner notes and packaging materials are overseen by an extremely small staff, and Shipley, Sevier, and Lunt write the majority of the liner notes themselves. Additionally, Shipley and Sevier track down the artists, sometimes negotiate compensation agreements with them and their families, and do much of the crate-digging and excavation of the neglected recordings, many of which are in various states of disrepair (Peisner, 2012). These details are not inconsequential because they make obvious the association that the founders have not only to the music that carries their label’s name but also of the performers’ stories of personal redemption. As Shipley has stated, “getting down to the microelements (of the stories) became more important than the music in some ways” (Brimmers, 2014). As he told Journalist Meg Onli of *ART21 Magazine*, “I will be the first person to admit that we certainly have records [where] the story is stronger than the music” (Onli, 2010).

In this sense, Numero Group's appeal can be attributed to its storytelling abilities as much as to the music itself, or at least that is what their media statements suggest. While Shipley might argue that "Numero is not a character in the story of a fifty-year-old black record label," his posture seems to emanate from a stance of defensiveness, a way of positioning Numero Group as mere collectors and distributors of stories, rather than as integral pieces of the stories themselves (Onli, 2010). The position becomes increasingly untenable, however, when one considers the degree to which Shipley's reclamation efforts foreground his own critiques of contemporary music. Numero Group might not be a character in Johnson's story, but stories like his afford Shipley the chance to make broader social critiques. His impeccable reputation, the result of his laudable redemption goals, grants him the status to do this. This makes clear the extent to which such efforts are not merely animated by an altruistic concern for remedying racial injustices but also as an opportunity to critique the vacuous state of contemporary popular music. In this sense, Shipley's instinct for redemption simultaneously becomes an excuse to offer comment on the most dispiriting aspects of modern recorded music: its intangibility, its excesses, its failures to preserve, and its disposability. "There are so many flavors of the month, I mean, Tapes 'n Tapes [popular indie rock band]? Who the fuck is that? ... This whole new generation has just changed the way that music is bought and digested and spat out," Shipley told *Pitchfork's* Gretta Cohn. Shipley's public image is infused with more than a little bit of nostalgic longing for a bygone era that he never had the opportunity to live through. As he has stated, "for the most part new records don't really do it for me" (Cohn, 2006). He later adds that he "wants records that are weird and esoteric to succeed ... there just aren't enough people doing it, unfortunately" (Cohn, 2006).

Such critique suggests an exasperated disposition and a displaced nostalgic longing for a more authentic era. As noted, this more authentic generation's music is slowly receding from memory's view. As Shipley states, "a lot of times when somebody dies they take their whole world with them in their brain and if you can't extract that information before they go, you never will. You're never going to have that opportunity to do that" (Margasak, 2014). Shipley's comments can be attached to other remarks he has made about the disposability of mp3s, suggesting that there is a certain hopelessness for the future of archival music reissuing. As he suggests, those who may want to excavate the archives of old Myspace accounts will find nothing but "garbage music for people who won't care about it in five minutes" because "you made this shit in your bedroom" (Jarnow, 2011). The "you" in this sentence seems to offer an indictment of an entire generation of musicians, and in fact, this particular remark references experimental musician Oneohtrix Point Never, who is known for his sampling, use of synthesizers, and association with the digital "vaporwave" genre of music.

As these remarks indicate, Numero Group is not merely a neutral steward of narratives of redemption but an active participant in subjective critiques of contemporary American music. By suggesting authenticity can only be experienced by preserving remnants of the past—and couching those remnants in a reconciliatory narrative of redemption—Numero Group positions itself as a purveyor and connoisseur of impeccable taste and judgment. While these media statements and profiles are crucial to establishing Numero's identity, it is in the redemption narratives themselves where Numero's company profile is given definition. As noted, Numero is obviously a *music* label, but their real appeal, as the founders themselves have admitted, is derived from their extensive packaging and through their elaborately detailed stories. In the following section I engage in analysis of the Grammy-nominated liner notes to Syl Johnson's

Complete Mythology box set by examining how the personalities of Johnson and Shipley engage with one another in an attempt to render intelligible Johnson's life "mythology." In the following section, I begin with an analysis of the words of Shipley, who assumes the role of the objective storyteller of Johnson's story.

Ken Shipley's Narration

The overriding purpose of Ken Shipley's liner notes to the Numero Group's Syl Johnson anthology is stated quite explicitly in the opening few pages of the notes. Shipley situates Johnson's mythos in a long tradition of soul and blues musicians, whose backstories are riddled with hyperbole and "half-truths muttered on sun-baked Mississippi porches" (p. 003). Shipley suggests in these opening few paragraphs that Johnson's own mythic background demands some type of definitive retelling—a trustworthy chronology of the spectacularly convoluted narrative that Johnson has told and retold over the years. Right away, Shipley's imagery is racially problematic. As rhetorical scholar Stephen King (2006, 2011) has persuasively argued, such images of sun-baked porches carries with it a denigrating narrative of primitivism, which functions to disseminate "privileged cultural narratives to audiences" (p. 237). Shipley writes that "fabrication is fully ingrained in blues tradition," citing Robert Johnson's supposed deal with the devil, and Bo Diddley's constant equivocations about the origins of his name. However, such fabrication is neither unique to the blues nor even endemic to it in relation to other genres (Jackson, 2005, pp. 208-209). Richard Peterson (1997) goes to great lengths in *Creating Country Music* to demonstrate how conceptions of the authentic country singer often relied on expert marketing, convoluted backstory, and invented personae. One could think of countless other examples in any genre of their choice. Associating Johnson's unreliability with "half-truths" on

Mississippi porches ties unreliability to primitivism and to the blues—a genre of music primarily associated with African-Americans. As the caretaker of Johnson’s legacy, Shipley must resolve such fabrications.

Shipley writes that most Syl Johnson interviews “veer toward harrowing voyages through interruption, correction, and deliberate obfuscation” (p. 003). Shipley states that “resolving [his] backstory for this collection became an exercise in patience and diligence, as we chased the rabbit through even more big-hole 45s than bear his name” (p. 003). This point is restated at the conclusion when Shipley declares the “mythology complete” and that the box set’s purpose is “not to finalize the Syl Johnson story but simply to set its foundations in stone” (p. 031). It is clear that Shipley wants to tell Johnson’s story, to write “our [Numero’s] own Syl Johnson biography” (p. 003). Shipley suggests that this more comprehensive Syl Johnson biography is a “myth in the making”—that his unrecognizability as a formative figure in soul and blues music justifies a more definitive retelling of his story. By bestowing Numero with the responsibility of telling Johnson’s biography, Shipley is further reinforcing his identification with Johnson. Most importantly, however, he is redeeming the errors of the music industry’s past by inventing Johnson as an authentic musician worthy of such efforts. Writing Johnson’s biography for him allows Shipley to do just that.

It would not be accurate, however, to suggest that Shipley’s *only* purpose is to provide a more veracious account of Johnson’s life in the music industry. Shipley suggests that this more dependable account is necessary because Johnson’s profile within the pantheon of soul music demands prominence, and that his obscure legacy is an unfortunate outcome of bad luck, possible racism, unwelcomed brashness, and an inability to make the crossover into pop music.

Shipley is writing these notes also to pass evaluative judgment on a career he deems “serious” enough to demand a “Herculean” four year effort to assemble this box set (p. 031). In these passages Shipley endows himself as the caretaker of Johnson’s path towards authentic self-fulfillment. Philosopher Charles Guignon (2004) argues that the first concept of authenticity is an “ideal of owning oneself, of achieving self-possession” (p. 7). Moreover, “the project of becoming authentic asks us to get in touch with the real self we have within, a task that is achieved primarily through introspection, self-reflection, or meditation” (p. 6). What is curious here is that Johnson’s path to self-realization is filtered through Shipley. Johnson’s legacy is not achieved through his own introspection but through Shipley’s historical retelling and the redemptive undercurrent that provides its coherency. This is a highly problematic rhetorical feature, as John L. Jackson (2005) argues in *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity*. Jackson argues that such authenticating narratives demand “hard, fast, and absolute sure-footedness” that foreclose the ability of racial subjects to ad-lib, to improvise, and to resist domesticating narrative scripts, which are designed to “rein in and control excesses” (pp. 17-18). Shipley, in these paragraphs, is assuming and applying these racial scripts in ways that foreclose Johnson’s agency—his ability to relish in those moments where his propensity for performative ambiguity, even outright misrepresentation, are cherished as chief factors of his artistic identity.

This represents a tension between Shipley’s obvious reverence for Johnson’s music and his own need to provide justification for that reverence and to smooth out the discrepancies in Johnson’s story, which often are excessive, improvised, and constantly modified by Johnson’s own whims. However, the reverence that Shipley has for Johnson’s music is intimated throughout the notes. He mentions that Johnson’s song “Right On” “burns the brightest” (p. 024) and that his song “Because I’m Black” was the “most inspiring and powerful song he’d ever

touch” (p. 023). The purpose here is evaluative judgment—usually positive—to reinforce Johnson’s positioning as an artist with credentials matching those singers whose legacies always eclipsed his own. While Johnson’s grandiose pronouncements about his own talent are noted throughout the essay, they are never entirely dismissed, which furthers the argument that there may in fact be some validity to his own self-conceived brilliance. For example, in the last sentence of the notes, Shipley quotes Johnson directly and writes that the quote will be both Johnson’s last word and “ours” [Numero Group]. “This is more than just a box set to me. This is the history of a masterful artist whose time has just arrived” (p. 031). By allowing the quote to stand as the record label’s own last word on Johnson it confirms Shipley’s central thesis: that Johnson is indeed a masterful artist who demands contemporary relevance. His justification is a projection of the authentic quality of Johnson’s persona. This box set is the proof.

Shipley is also, however, acting as a critic when he makes judgments about the “heavy and sometimes cynical undertone” that would dominate Johnson’s output in 1969 or that his music could be alternately “positively uplifting” when the cynical veneer was pulled back. These evaluative judgments are sprinkled throughout the text. Most importantly, Shipley is interested in writing Numero Group’s “own biography” (p. 003). This positions Shipley as not only a historian seeking to educate the reader on the true history of Johnson’s musical journey, but also as the co-founder of a record label known for its painstakingly meticulous attention to detail. In the concluding section of the liner notes Shipley assumes the role of record label co-owner when he spends almost an entire paragraph describing how impossibly difficult it was to put this box set together for distribution. Shipley recounts that “almost all of our [Numero Group’s] steps headed straight uphill” (p. 031). In these sections Shipley invites praise for the difficulty of the task—not only in rendering some coherency to Johnson’s backstory, but in taking the

considerable pains necessary to share this music and legacy with others. Again, Shipley is making it known that he is very much participating in Johnson's own quest for authenticity, one predicated on unrealized self-actualization. He is an active, knowing participant in Johnson's sense of "becoming, self-transcendence, and self-creation" (Golomb, 1995, p. 9). In these sections, where Shipley is directly weaving himself in Johnson's narrative, it would not be completely inaccurate to state that this represents mere vicariousness—that Shipley is simply deriving status from his association with a more authentic person, playing a more authentic music, from a more authentic era. This era, as I have demonstrated, is one informed by a nostalgic longing for a more authentic soul music.

However, Shipley's earnestness should not be completely dismissed. Shipley's commitment to Johnson's own quest can be seen as an authentic quest unto itself. His commitments to the project are earnestly undertaken and his wholeheartedness seems genuine. With this said, his interest in Johnson arises out of a sense of loss, a sense of a culture debased, a legacy slowly fading, and a disappointment that "real" music can only be found by digging up the relics of the past. As noted, this process of identification occurs in dialogue. Now that I have articulated how Shipley's persona functions in the text, I turn to the second part of this exchange—the one provided by Johnson.

Syl Johnson

The most important personality in the *Complete Mythology* liner notes is that of Johnson himself. Shipley's biographical account is peppered with many quotes from Johnson that illuminate both his swaggering sense of self-importance and his unwavering confidence in his own legacy. There are two coordinating roles that Johnson assumes: that of one of soul music's

undiscovered gems and that of a resentful and sometimes bitter musician who had been forever overshadowed by his peers. In the opening paragraphs of the liner notes, Johnson states, “I was a jack-of-all-trades. More soul than Marvin [Gaye], more funk than James [Brown] ... I rate right at the top, though I’ve been underrated all my life” (p.003). The end of the liner notes ends in much the same way. Johnson writes, “I see myself at the top. I’m not [Burt] Bacharach, no Quincy Jones. But I’m just as good” (p. 031). Further, “if you listen to me now, damn, my voice is still as good as it was when I was 28” (p. 031). This section demonstrates an attempt by Johnson to justify his own brilliance.

Johnson again reinforces his own strident persona as soul music’s underappreciated visionary, a designation that he himself has bestowed. He declares his song “Is it Because I’m Black” as “one of the greatest message records ever recorded” and his song “Different Strokes” as “bigger than [Michael Jackson’s] ‘Billy Jean’” (p. 031). Shipley does not wholly deny the claims, merely stating that the points of view come from Syl’s own “lofty vantage point” (031). In fact, Shipley seems to agree, asserting, “*Is it Because I’m Black* can rightly be called the first black concept album, a distinction few give it credit for ... Johnson’s record never got a whiff of the two million copies Gaye’s did in its first year of availability” (p. 031). In this sense, Shipley is sanctioning this version of Johnson’s legacy, and in a sense, also suggesting that his own appreciation, concern, and critical acumen in restoring Johnson’s prominence deserves praise. He is finding his own sense of self-purpose and self-realization through Johnson’s persona and through his own involvement in the reclamation of a more authentic era. He is righting history’s wrongs.

The second role that Johnson assumes is that of a bitter, jilted musician who could never enjoy the success of his peers who perpetually overshadowed him and may have even conspired in his lack of success. The bitter tone projects a down-on-his-luck musician persona. These anxieties are part of what is alleviated in the project of authenticity. Their demonstration therefore indicates a feeling of *inauthenticity* on the part of Johnson. Corey Anton (2001) argues that an inauthentic mode of selfhood is characterized by “an existential languor, by emotive and volitional disclosures of one’s felt irrelevance to the world” (p. 155). Therefore, this bitterness is part of what must be overcome if Johnson is to realize a more authentic sense of self, and he cannot do it without Shipley’s narration. The epigraph of the liner notes makes Johnson’s persona undeniable: “I wanna be somebody so bad, but you keep on putting your foot on me” (p. 003). This song lyric frames the rest of Shipley’s notes and leads into the opening paragraph where Johnson states, “I made my opportunities, but I never got the breaks I should have gotten” (p. 003). Shipley reinforces Johnson’s sad-luck persona by stating that “something, someone, and sometimes—if you believe his lyrics—the sole of a shoe was holding him back” (p. 003). Shipley prefaces these statements with “To hear him tell it,” which acknowledges that Johnson’s self-importance and bitterness are impossible to unravel from one another.

Johnson’s bitter tone further reveals itself throughout Shipley’s narrative retelling. Johnson turns the bitterness towards record labels and other musicians whose stardom he aspired towards. When discussing the record label Tag Ltd, an upstart Los Angeles-based record label founded in 1966, Johnson says, “They leased it [the song] and reneged on the next deal. They made a big mistake when they turned down ‘Sock it To Me’” (p. 012). When discussing one of his songs being overdubbed without his voice, he states, “those motherfuckers stole my shit” (p. 026). Johnson’s coordinated bitterness/grandiosity is also directed against James Brown, who he

says “didn’t want me in there ‘cause I was young, good-looking, and I got a good voice” (p. 010). Similar resentment is expressed towards Al Green. In this way, Johnson’s quotes dodge in and out of Shipley’s supposed objective narrative retelling, but ultimately his two personas are confirmed. He comes across as underappreciated, self-important, justifiably grandiose, and ultimately vindicated in his bitterness towards those who denied him greater visibility. This is critical in his positioning as an authentic musician being saved from underserved obscurity by Shipley and the Numero Group. Tone and persona function as concomitant factors in rendering Johnson as a bitter yet incontestably brilliant musician, a fact that is made evident through his bitter, self-confident tone. Johnson is an unabashed braggart, and his self-confident tone interjects itself throughout Shipley’s liner notes. Johnson’s interjections, combined with Shipley’s own rhetoric, suggest that Johnson’s own words indicate a lack of consciousness of the situation, as he continues to cling to an inflated version of himself. When Shipley seeks to set the record straight he is in fact giving Johnson and his audience a more “reasonable” assessment of Johnson’s career, assuming that Johnson’s own reflection on the liner notes will actually grant him an acceptance of the pride and humiliation that his own words suggest.

The dramatic thrust of the narrative is given added gravity by the topic headings and introductory quotations that frame the narrative. The quotations and headings break the notes up into sections based principally on Johnson’s stints and subsequent disputes with various record labels. The dramatic elements are made obvious by some of the topic headings (i.e. “Enter Twinight” and “Twinight Descends”). The last page of the notes unequivocally states, “Mythology Complete” (p. 031). This typical narrative arc ends with an obvious denouement, but one that “seeks not to finalize the Syl Johnson story but simply to set its foundation in stone” (p. 031). The heading indicates that not only can the reader be assured that Johnson’s legacy has

been truthfully recounted, but that the Numero Group's own "Herculean" effort has evinced a corresponding sense of conclusiveness. As Shipley writes on the final page, "after three years drifting rudderless through phone calls, meetings, and off-the-cuff interviews, the still-childlike Syl—sporting Karl Kani knock-off jeans and his Obama cap slightly askew—finally relented [in letting his story be told]" (p. 031). This conclusion therefore provides satisfying closure to both parallel narratives. The structure ensures that the mythology is complete. As Judith Butler (2005) asserts, when narratives are thematized, and I would argue, when tone and persona are this bracing, the nature of the address evicts the addresser from his or her own story (p. 63). There is a "suspect coherence that sometimes attaches to narrative, specifically, with the way in which narrative coherence may foreclose an ethical resource—namely, an acceptance of the limits of knowability in oneself and others" (p. 63). Butler argues that this type of coherence, the type that is so prized by Shipley, presents an unattainable ideal and imposes a sense of finality that precludes the opportunities for a more ephemeral sense of authenticity. By offering a sense of finality, Shipley is suggesting that authenticity is a finite resource. Once it is experienced we have to look for the next artist that can be rediscovered, invented as authentic, and thrown into association with Shipley and the Numero Group.

As this analysis reveals, Shipley is acting as sole objective steward of Johnson's story. With regard to such narrative features, Golomb (1995) argues that "the more information the author discloses about private events such as his characters' feelings and thoughts, the more the author asserts himself as the omnipotent controller of the narration" (p. 21). As Ronald L. Jackson's (2005) work also makes clear, such omnipotent control becomes even more troubling when coupled with subordinating racial scripts, a narrative feature that Debra Walker King (2008) suggests forecloses any type of oppositional response by African-Americans (p. 99). By

giving himself the last word, by making Johnson's last word the Numero Group's own last word, Shipley is implicating himself in Johnson's own project of reclamation. He is unreservedly finding authenticity through his own identification with Johnson and this serves to justify Numero's goals in preserving and projecting an authentic posture that finds realness in exchange with those who have come before—or at least the nostalgic fantasy of what has come before. He is redeeming the music industry for their failures of recognition and also conferring authentic status on Johnson as a way of justifying the redemption.

Charles Taylor (1991) argues that the culture of authenticity and of authentic self-making depends on being “true to oneself” even when that authenticity comes in “degraded, absurd, or trivialized forms” (p. 29). Therefore, Johnson's posturing and mythmaking can in and of themselves be taken as authentic self-expression even though it lacks accuracy—even though it is not “authentic” in the conventional understanding of the term as meaning verifiable authorship (Varga, 2012, p. 1). In response to such problematic features, David Wallace (2011) argues for a rhetoric that “engages the individual's subjectivity rather than attempting to erase it and accounts for the positioning of that subjectivity within the discourse of power that enfranchise some and marginalize others” (p. 5). Shipley's liner notes attempt to do this by letting Johnson's own persona come through so forcefully, but they nevertheless are subject to Shipley's own aims and his own vicarious association with an “authentic” performer.

Shipley is able to purchase authenticity for his record label through Johnson's story, and his own record label exists as a response to the perceived dearth of authentic experience currently available in popular music culture. This is therefore an important window into a much wider cultural problem. As Svetlana Boym (2001) persuasively argues, “invented tradition does

not mean a creation ex nihilo or a pure act of social constructivism; rather it builds on the sense of loss of community and cohesion and offers a comforting collective script for individual longing” (p. 42). It is a “collective script” that these liner notes are attempting to write as a response to an individual longing for a time never experienced. They are a metonymic text in the way that they encapsulate the abstract principles of redemption, loss, and cultural vacuity in a project of redemption. In the following conclusion I offer comment on the implications of Numero Group’s project, and of its positioning in this broader cultural context at a loss to find itself in anything beyond the superficial.

Conclusion

As I have demonstrated, Ken Shipley and the Numero Group have built into their ethos a certain preservationist ethic that is instructive as a case study into how the deployment of authenticity functions at moments of cultural anxiety. The milieu within which the Numero Group sits is one experiencing this anxiety—an anxiety about the loss of substance, loss of tangibility, and a dissatisfaction with contemporary markers of authentic culture. Shipley and Numero access the authentic vicariously through the experiences, remembrances, and documentation of those who have come before. It is an inherently backward-looking project, and as such, suggests that authenticity can only be found in what came before, in unearthing and savoring those moments with those who were around when things felt more real.

The Numero Group’s *Complete Mythology* liner notes therefore acknowledge that the rhetoric of nostalgic longing complicates the relationship between soul’s past and present. In its insistence on redemption for Syl Johnson’s career, Shipley and the Numero Group show meticulous concern for righting wrongs, correcting misrepresentation, and resolving personal

emotional conflict. However, in the process of documenting Johnson's struggles, the Numero Group also implies a reverence for the musical era within which these ills occurred, as the music produced within this era seems to be the only type capable of being rendered authentically. While certainly not impossible for these two opinions to be held simultaneously, Numero's rhetoric implies that the oppressive conditions under which Johnson suffered—the very kind that drove him to write songs like “Is it Because I'm Black?”—are almost necessary requirements for the production of authentic soul music. Shipley's subtle paternalism, his need to provide finality for Johnson and to sufficiently display his altruistic concern, only makes this tendency more evident and troubling. In this sense, Johnson's music is valorized precisely because Shipley has included all of the narrative elements—the racism, the bad luck, the missed opportunities—that give Johnson's story its dramatic flair and heroic finality. The same concerns that rhetorical scholars have documented in “white hero” narratives are present here; however, the white hero is not merely validating the nobleness of the black protagonist, or, in the words of Owen and Ehrenhaus (2010), “attempting to reassert control of [the] cultural production of meaning” (p. 149). More than this, he is also insisting that the protagonist's heroism derives primarily from precise aesthetic choices that ought to be cherished for their authenticity. These choices, as Shipley and other Numero representatives have made abundantly clear, are ones that are absent from much of contemporary music. Redeeming Johnson's legacy is not, then, merely another example of the white hero asserting control over the narrative (although it is certainly that), it is also a strategic critique of contemporary music aesthetics and the types of conditions necessary to create authentic art. By concluding that Johnson's mythology is complete, the Numero Group is also asserting that this particular chapter of more authentic American music is also complete.

This particular logic, I conclude, is both worth admiring and condemning. Numero's push for redemption is a necessary and admirable pursuit, but their successes, much like that of Daptone, depend on a nonconforming aesthetic purity no matter the consequences or implications. As Smith (2000) argues, claims of nostalgia, and I would argue claims of authenticity, are worth keeping around, put simply, because there are parts of the past worth preserving and celebrating (p. 522). Such rhetorical assurance provides a respite from feelings of alienation, disconnect, and of being out-of-time. This is clearly a rhetorical appeal with an unbending endurance, as both Daptone and Numero are wildly successful, and this success, as I have argued in this chapter and in the preceding chapters, is intimately tied to such an appeal.

However, when those insurances on preservation and purity become non-negotiable, they tend to imply a sense of hopelessness for the future, and worse, they inadvertently suggest that authentic soul music requires the catalyzing presence of social upheaval. Obviously, the founders of the Numero Group are not advocating for the return of 1960s racism, but their organizational rhetoric makes certain that these were the conditions that made the music so impossibly moving and enduring. In providing finality to the story, the Numero Group forecloses the opportunity to look progressively at what present-day soul music might offer contemporary listeners—how these listeners have been equally moved by such music, and how they have used it in their own lives to overcome their own anxieties and feelings of alienation and disaffection.

Perhaps, then, it might be useful for the Numero Group to simply reframe their rhetoric—to couch it in different terms and to cherish these stories as inspiration for finding authenticity in experiences that are not rapidly vanishing, but ones that are in their infancy just waiting to be discovered. Charles Guignon (2004) argues that it is in the telling of stories themselves that

authenticity can be achieved, and as a result, we should go out of our way to embrace “the continuous, ongoing, open-ended activity of living out a story over the course of time” (p. 127). Such an orientation would also be more sympathetic in recognizing that historical veracity can sometimes limit opportunities for minority communities to exercise their own performative improvisation. Mystique, obfuscation, and inscrutability keep audiences guessing, keep them from settling into predictable scripts, and keep artistic culture writ large from getting too comfortable in its own predictability. Such a positioning is forward-looking in its orientation and acknowledges that authenticity is not necessarily something that can be understood vicariously, nostalgically, or through the rose-colored glasses of retrospection. Numero Group should therefore cherish the *process* of reclamation and storytelling, leaving behind the traces of hopelessness that are too often revealed in their words and actions. As Guignon concludes, “seen from this standpoint, we are not just tellers of a story, nor are we something told. We are a telling” (p. 127). Numero Group, and the cultural trend they embody, would be wise to take notice.

It cannot be doubted that the Numero Group is telling a good story; they are using narrative and historical remembrance as a way of solidifying legacy while also documenting and archiving a more authentic time. But, as I ask in the following chapter, what if these narratives were, as Guignon suggests, a more active participant in constituting a more hopeful future? What if the narratives of this more authentic past were made to “dwell” in the future? As I demonstrate in the following chapter, soul music’s legacy—its cities, its performers, its studios—provide guidance not only in posture (“shitty is pretty”), but in the sonic qualities of the music itself. In the view of soul’s contemporary practitioners, these stories must be removed from the archive and activated in the present. These stories, these characters, these places, and these sounds from

the past must live on in the material environs of soul music's present, and most crucially, they must live and breathe among the performers themselves. It is through this sense of presence, this sense of the past made to live and dwell in the present, that gives further definition to the genre of soul music. This will be the focus of the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Soul's "Authentic" Places: McLemore Avenue and the House of Soul

As should be clear from the preceding chapters, soul music's legacy is wrought with contradiction, misperception, and inconsistency. Conventional wisdom about how soul music should be played, who should be allowed to play it, and how we approach its past have been consistently undermined by countervailing evidence, confused narratives, and faulty assumptions. The fact is, however, that soul music remains recognizable as a music genre—a genre marked by imprecision but accepted nevertheless as having common features and formal components. Scholars of popular music, using terms certainly recognizable to rhetorical scholars working in genre studies, use generic categories as organizing mechanisms for analyses serving a number of different critical purposes. These can be roughly organized along two primary disciplinary orientations: the sociological/critical-cultural perspective and the musicological perspective. Taking the former position, Simon Frith (1996) shows how generic categorization is primarily a means through which industry executives “organize the sales process” (p. 75). Amanda Nell Edgar (2014) similarly describes how generic categorization reinforces “bordering rhetorics” used by industry executives that “allow white artists to remain in the dominant sphere of popular musical genres while borrowing from the traditions of artists whose work is ghettoized” (p. 170). Such sentiment is echoed by Gayle Wald (1998), whose soul music analysis foregrounds the dangers of white musicians reviving “black musical traditions outside of their original cultural context” because they “enshrine white experience and benefit white musicians” (p. 156). Roy Shuker (1994) and Lawrence Grossberg (1992) take similar critical orientations, describing popular music genres as policed by executives who view such categories as “commodity forms” that cannot be “defined in musical terms” (Shuker, 1994, p. 10, Grossberg, 1992, p. 131). Such explanations, to varying degrees, see these labels as illuminating issues of

power, privilege, and commodity fetishism while diminishing the importance of formal musical components in distinguishing between generic categories.

Such sociological and critical-cultural approaches have been heavily criticized by prominent musicologists. In an insightful illumination of problems with such approaches, musicologist Robert Walser (2003) argues that “we should be historicizing all music and accounting in each case for the particular pleasures that are offered and thus for the values on which they depend and to which they appeal” (p. 20). Walser and Susan McClary (1988) argue that such criticism is animated by a “desire to find explicit political agendas and intellectual complexity in the art it wants to claim and a distrust of those dimensions of art that appeal to the senses, to physical pleasure” (p. 287). Walser offers this admonition in response to critical methodologies, like those practiced by cultural studies scholars, who do not “display any grasp of how musicians learn to produce affective responses through their negotiation of shared codes” (Walser, 2003, p. 20). Walser lumps Grossberg and Frith into the critique, suggesting both “stand squarely in the way of attempts to develop popular music analyses that are both specific and consequential” (p. 19).

Scholar Keith Negus (1996) similarly argues against Grossberg’s insistence on sociological and contextual explanations of music, preferring instead to see the specifics and particulars of style and genre, syncopation and instrumentation (p. 162). To summarize, such critical-cultural and sociological approaches to musical genre, according to this critique, lack three important factors: a sense of history, a sense of pleasure, and an acknowledgment of how musical sound produces pleasure. While I believe Walser and Negus may be overly dismissive, there is much truth in their suggestions that too often scholars in critical and cultural studies rely

on musical analyses that are only cursorily informed by musical histories and, in the case of soul music, are often reliant on dubious and essentializing narratives that fit neatly into reductive templates for cultural criticism. Such scholarship produces sweeping generalities about authenticity in soul music, superficially reducing the relationship to nothing more than “a racialized attempt by the white male music industry to justify its exploitative colonizing presence in black musical culture” (Edgar, 2014, p. 172). This is certainly not to deny the existence of exploitation in the history of soul music, as I believe critical-cultural scholars like Wald and Edgar make insightful observations about the relationship between race and genre. However, such criticism obfuscates the centrality of histories of sound, formulations of place, and the agency exercised by both white and black musicians within the confines of the recording studio in defining the soul music genre.

Musicological accounts also fail to completely apprehend these features, often relying on purely musical explanations not easily comprehensible to those with untrained ears. Musicologists Susan McClary and Robert Walser (1988) acknowledge this point when they argue that often musicological explanation obfuscates “perfectly transparent phenomenon” by “flaunting specialized and apparently useless information” (p. 279). Musicologists, they argue, too often mystify the processes of music, either writing too impressionistically about how the music feels, or trying too hard to “explain precisely how the effect was achieved” (p. 280). While critical musicologists like Lawrence Kramer and Susan McClary have remedied some of these concerns, such approaches still persist. Rob Bowman’s (2003) overly technical analysis of the “harmonic settings” of Otis Redding, Aretha Franklin, and Sam Cooke is one example of this persistence. Anyone who is not a serious musician would have trouble comprehending an analysis of Aretha Franklin’s music that contained sentences like “this is a sublime moment of

sonic design which exists in a white noise antecedent-consequent relationship with the sibilant sounding of the ‘ss’ of ‘possess’ one bar later” (p. 116).

In this chapter I offer a corrective and complement to such critical orientations by suggesting an approach that involves understanding the circumstances under which performers of soul music came to know each other and how these chance encounters were influenced by neighborhood dynamics, the studios within which the music was recorded, and the composition of the house bands that provided continuity between label artists. In what follows I draw on comparisons between Stax Records of the 1960s and Daptone Records of today as a way of describing how geographic place, including studio location and its spatial components, went about influencing the types of sounds produced by the house bands at both of these labels. As I demonstrate, the relationship between these components is essential in understanding the complexities of the soul genre because it shows how Daptone’s conception of authenticity is arrived at by recreating the exact features present at Stax 50 years earlier. Such recreation offers an explicit acknowledgment that in order for one to play contemporary soul music authentically, these aforementioned components must be faithfully replicated. Such replication suggests that soul music, even in contemporary times, is indelibly wedded to particular types of geographical locations and studio specifications, and these locations and specifications are absolutely essential in understanding how “authentic” soul music is made to sound the way it does. I argue that such comparison between Stax and Daptone resists easy dichotomies made by critical-cultural scholars between forceful exploitation and doleful acquiescence, white inauthenticity and black authenticity, and even the notion of a “black musical culture” and a “white musical culture.” Such analysis shifts critical focus back to the musicians, their sounds, their places, and their preferences, in an attempt to reclaim authenticity not solely as a discourse used to enforce

practices of exploitation, but as a barometer of artistic worth and personal merit, an aspirational ideal guiding the artist in the pursuit for a more fulfilled life.

In pursuing this goal, my analysis will take a narrative form. I intend to tell the stories of Stax and Daptone by focusing on their geographical location, their studios, and the musicians who came together in those locations to form the house bands for their respective labels. In doing so, I hope to not merely demonstrate the replication present in Daptone's approach to making music, but also to show how the circumstances differ between Stax and Daptone in ways that are significant to how we understand authenticity in soul music. In telling these stories I break down my analysis into two separate sections within each "story:" 1) an explanation of the neighborhood and the city within which the studio resides and 2) a description of the equipment, spatial components, and personalities involved in comprising the house band sound of each label.

In sketching out profiles of these two recording studios, I first want to highlight a key theoretical assumption that will guide my analysis. I wish to foreground Thomas Rickert's adaptation of Heidegger's concept of "dwelling." Rickert describes dwelling as "how people come together to flourish (or try to flourish) in a place, or better, how they come together in the continual making of a place; at the same time, that place is interwoven into the way they have come to be as they are" (p. xiii). In an assumption I share, Rickert argues that from such a perspective, "issues pertaining to affects (the *pathos*), and the role of the environment are elevated in priority; they are no longer simply *complementary* to rhetorical theory but rather absolutely *integral* to it" (p. xiii, his emphasis). Along these lines, the connection I wish to draw is between geographic environment (literally the city within which the studio is located), the environment of the studio itself (Stax Recording Studio and Daptone's House of Soul Recording

Studio), and the interactions between the house band musicians within that studio environment (Stax's Booker T. & the M.G.'s and Daptone's Dap-Kings). It is the connection between these three factors that provide the points of continuity between the two labels. First, I turn to Stax Records.

The Memphis Sound

926 E. McLemore Avenue - Memphis, Tennessee

Stax Records' location at the corner of College and McLemore may have seemed like a nondescript location. In 1960, the former Capitol Theater was in a section of south Memphis that did not even have a name (Gordon, 2013, p. 22). However, the choice of location was a strategic one, according to songwriter and ubiquitous Stax session musician Chips Moman, who pushed founders Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton into locating their recording studio in a primarily African-American neighborhood in South Memphis (p. 22). The businesses at the corner of College and McLemore and the nearby Bellevue Park had long been integrated, and according to popular music historian Robert Gordon, "in a town of long memory, no one could recall racial altercations there" (p. 22). Despite the integrated surroundings, the Capitol Theater itself was strictly segregated. The theater had to be completely gutted and reimagined as a completely different business that accommodated both white and black patrons. Founders Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton, along with guitarist Steve Cropper, gutted the theater, laid down the carpet, configured the acoustics, and tacked up the sound panels, which they fashioned from a combination of pegboard and burlap (p. 28).

These details may seem trivial, especially in relation to a discussion of the racialized establishment of genres of music. However, these genres are habituated, their material and contextual circumstances are not incidental to them becoming recognizable. Soul music, especially the southern soul music of Stax, is given definition by the relative harmony and balance of white and black musicians playing together. This is, as Peter Guralnick (1986) asserts, soul music's "irreducible component" (p. 10). Stax's location in a formerly segregated movie theater in a mostly-black neighborhood known otherwise for its absence of racial confrontation becomes significant for two reasons. Most superficially it functioned as an attempt to symbolically banish segregation from the neighborhood's commercial corner. It inaugurated the site as a place where, at the very least, white and black residents could coexist together. However, and much more importantly, it occasioned a different "attunement," a new modality of wakefulness and entanglement between one's "immersion (being with) and specificity (the way of our being there)" (Rickert, 2013, p. 9). The possibilities of the Capitol Theater site, once a lingering reminder of Memphis' broader racial antagonisms, had now become a space seamlessly assimilated into the corner's integrated surroundings. The Capitol Theater, now envisioned as a combination record store (Satellite) and recording studio (Stax) had therefore become attuned to new possibilities of "dwelling"—an attentiveness to a new "supply of directives" for "creating, constructing, and building" (p. 16). According to Robert Gordon (2013), the commercial strip had now become "a complete universe in which the kids could orbit" rather than one where a black child could not even be caught looking at the theater's marquee (p. 29).

The shift in south Memphis' social dynamics also corresponded with co-founder Jim Stewart's newfound appreciation for American rhythm and blues music, which he first heard in 1959 (p. 33). A country fiddler by trade, Stewart found an intense appreciation for the music of

Ray Charles at nearly the same time that he was fashioning a recording studio from the gutted interiors of a segregated movie theater. In this sense, Stewart's "musical landscape was about to synchronize with his studio's physical geography" (p. 33). Moreover, Stewart's sister and co-founder Estelle Axton had recognized that the theater's concession stand would make for an ideal place for a record store (p. 29). Axton stated that "this was a largely black neighborhood so I had to get into the rhythm and blues records" (p. 29). As a result of the record store's location, both the studio and the store were quite literally feeling the rhythms of the neighborhood and responding to them with choices occasioned by the studio's geography, the neighborhood's socio-demographics, and the chance encounters made possible as the neighborhood responded to their new tenants. While such synchronicity is always fleeting, such moments of inspired clarity helped to define the contours of what would become known as soul music. I argue that this simply could not have happened without an appreciation, whether consciously acted upon or unconsciously internalized, of how the "environment takes part in the doing" (Rickert, 2013, p. 243). As Rickert argues, "our traditional sense of aesthetics . . . occludes how the material environment is itself already part of what the 'art' *is*" (p. 30, his emphasis). Rickert describes this attunement variously as called forth through conditioning, occasioning, a priori affectability, or as a "cradle" that is "enmeshed in material locales that give place and bearing prior to symbolicity proper" (p. 161). Understood in this way, soul's originary locales—the material environment, the chance synchronicity, and the entangled relationship between the two—can help one make sense of how the soul genre manifests as an emergence of sound and place attuned to one another. In the case of Stax Records, such an attunement was often perceived to be unconsciously received. As Jim Stewart remarked, "we didn't sit down and say, 'We're going with black music. R&B was a foreign word to me. It happened quickly, but not in a manner that

was conscious and direct” (Gordon, 2013, p. 35). Historian Peter Guralnick (1986) confirms this point in stating that “the amazing thing is that when it [Stax] began, neither of its founders even knew what a record company was, let alone what a rhythm and blues record was supposed to sound like” (p. 98).

Such an attunement helps to explain, for example, how a white guitarist from “safe, suburban Memphis” (Steve Cropper) might find himself as a clerk at Satellite Records “consorting with what some folks called wild Nee-groes” (Hirshey, 1984, p. 305). Cropper credits his interest in so-called “black” music with a very special type of attunement, a self-styled “organic” way of “hearing differently” that was unique to his upbringing (p. 305). As such, it represented a resistance to the preordained life of fraternity parties and middle-class banality so passively accepted by his peers (p. 305). This is all so ephemeral to be sure, but the perceptions are nevertheless real. The idea that the material environment is calling forth a response, issuing directives, revealing affordances, and patterning a disposition seems undeniable. As Joel Rudinow (2010) argues, “where else but in Memphis would a frustrated country filled player like Jim Stewart stumble onto the materials and means of recording what would become known as the Stax sound?” (p. 16). Geography is no doubt crucial, but as Rudinow argues, the development of such a sound was also the result of “trial and error and blind serendipitous encounters between unanticipated circumstances and unique and forceful individual personalities” (p. 16). As Rudinow argues, Stewart (and likely Moman), had no idea that the corner of College and McLemore was “in a neighborhood that would go on to supply so much of the talent that wrote and recorded at Stax and created the Stax sound” (p. 16). As these anecdotes contend, Memphis, Tennessee as a locale and catalyst for the emergence of genre, was more than

just backdrop—it was an active participant, a co-conspirator in the cradling and conditioning of a new sound.

Cropper's admission that such environs spurred in him an "organic" desire to "hear differently" makes clear the connection between sound, affect, and place. I believe it would be naïve, however, to assume that such "hearing," a reaction no doubt to the sounds perceived to be "black," is one completely absent of the presence of symbolism. As noted music and English professor Lawrence Kramer (2011) argues, music, and the transmission to the listener, is often perceived to be one of "pure immediacy," but this immediacy is "really accessible only when some semantic association, however tacitly, creates a platform for listening" (p. 73). As he argues more bluntly, "there can be no musical immediacy without a hidden mediator" (p. 73). Kramer's notion of a "platform for listening" is a more explicitly symbolic understanding of musical listening and hearing, but it connects well to the idea that there are conditions and restraints on listening—mediations—that both foreclose and afford opportunities for the artist or musician to respond and relate to their art differently. Cropper's listening platform, mediated by environment, geography, location, and his own sense of nonconforming rebellion coalesced in Memphis with similarly minded musicians all trying to acknowledge and accept the diverse palette of sounds and pretensions to which they were witnesses.

The material environs and urban geography of Memphis, Tennessee in 1960 are absolutely essential to understanding the sonic attunements cultivated at Stax Records. The location of Satellite Records directly next to the recording studio allowed easy access for store clerk Steve Cropper and a dependable meeting place for young high school students like Booker T. Jones, the organist and multi-instrumentalist who would form Booker T. & the MG's with

drummer Al Jackson Jr., bassist Donald “Duck” Dunn, and guitarist Steve Cropper. As Guralnick explains, The Satellite Record Shop “served as a kind of on-the-spot barometer of taste for the fledgling operators of the label” (p. 97). Future Stax songwriter David Porter, who would later pen classics like “Soul Man” with songwriting partner Isaac Hayes bagged groceries across the street and Booker T. Jones and singer William Bell attended the same church nearby (p. 97). As Guralnick explains, 926 McLemore Avenue was “where it all came together. That is where the whole unlikely cast of characters, plus or minus one or two, gathered and met on nearly equal ground—at least for a while” (p. 111). As a bewildered Guralnick wondered, “where else would a wet-behind-the-ears Booker T. Jones ever have gotten the chance to escape both the ghetto and the black bourgeoisie, to interact with such a lively and different musical intelligence as Chips Moman’s?” (p. 111). This unlikely cast of characters, with Jones at the center, would go on to form the backbone of the Stax sound.

The House Band, Its Sound, and Its Studio

The establishment of a house band like the MG’s became an elemental feature of what would become known as the Memphis “sound” (Gordon, 2013, p. 67). Robert Gordon suggests that such a house band, comprised of the black Jackson and Booker T. with the white Dunn and Cropper, “established a level of communication that transcended race and age” (p. 67). Original MG’s bassist Lewie Steinberg suggested that “we integrated Stax and didn’t think no more about it than the man on the moon” (p. 67). One of the label’s foremost songs, the instrumental “Green Onions,” saw “hillbilly” country guitarist Cropper using a Fender Esquire guitar (known for its prominence on records by Johnny Cash) over the top of Booker T.’s gospel organ, features that Gordon describes as a “meeting of styles anticipating a racial reality on the streets that many

people preferred to deny” (p. 65). Brian Ward (1998) writes that the “country-soul” indicative of Stax featured structures that were similar to country and western ballads but also suffused with “the rhythmic urgency and compelling call and response strategies of gospel, and always dominated by the interpretive flexibility and emotional integrity of black sacred music” (p. 224). Diane Pecknold (2012) likewise observes how Isaac Hayes’ cover of the songwriter Jimmy Webb’s pop-country song “By the Time I Get to Phoenix” allowed him to “mark out the limits of shared Black and white experience” (p. 196). Brian Ward (1998), borrowing a phrase from scholar Albert Murray, describes such a mish-mash of influence, style, rhythm, and race as suggestive of an “incontestably mulatto” American culture, a distillation of soul’s formative moments captured in the meeting of unlikely counterparts (p. 11).

Besides the personalities involved—personalities brought into serendipitous encounter no less—the “Memphis Sound” became definable as a result of the studio’s unconventional approach to rehearsing, arranging, and recording. Stax chose against the prevailing wisdom of the day that suggested that a session’s producer dictate the instructions for how to play the arranger’s charts (Gordon, 2013, p. 81). In the studios at Atlantic Records in New York, for example, “certain people worked in the control room, others on the studio floor, and they communicated on microphones through the glass, with neither invading the other’s space” (p. 81). Stax’s preference for head arrangements—arrangements memorized and never written down—shifted importance away from the arranger and instead, according to Atlantic executive Jerry Wexler who cut many tracks at Stax, functioned as a “reversion to the symbiosis between the producer and the rhythm section” (Guralnick, 1986, p. 152). In Gerri Hirshey’s (1984) *Nowhere to Run: The Story of Soul Music*, Wexler describes head arrangements as shifting the “creative burden” to the rhythm section, foregrounding the importance of instinct, the

subconscious, and the ad-lib, which he describes as a distinctly southern touch (p. 299).

Moreover, such head arrangements championed the virtues of the unstudied and the untutored.

As Isaac Hayes was quoted as saying, you did not study a particular sound, “you breathed it, is all” (p. 299).

Stax’s reliance on head arrangements and the studio’s layout, which emphasized face-to-face interaction between integrated musicians, made it possible for singers like Otis Redding to “get right in the player’s face—horns, guitar, drums—and imitate the sound or rhythm in his head by using his whole body to convey the impact he desired” (Gordon, 2013, p. 89). Redding’s in-the-face was uniquely suited to play to the strengths of drummer Al Jackson Jr., who Steve Cropper argued contributed more than any other musician to the Memphis Stax sound (p. 93). As Gordon argues, “Otis was guided by his gut, and Al could anchor him, could determine the rhythm, the groove, and the feel that would hold the song and allow Otis to get his ideas across” (pp. 93-94). Stax’s reliance on head arrangements and the pace and flow dictated by the rhythm section of Jackson and Dunn was encouraged by the studio’s playback speakers, which were giant Altec “Voice of the Theater” speakers that were left over from the old Capitol Theater. Peter Guralnick (1986) credits the bass-heavy playback speakers and the oddly configured sloping floor and bathroom echo-chamber as integral to the Stax sound (p. 97).

There is no escaping, therefore, the role of location, geography, and sonic affordance in the emergence of the Memphis Stax-soul sound. The confluence of happenstance, conscious choice, unconscious intuition, and blind naïvete set the Stax sound apart from its assembly-line counterparts at Motown. The notion of an integrated house band all assembled in a single oversized former movie theater, all “breathing” in the groove, to use Isaac Hayes’ words,

suggests an understanding of musical genre that attends to the ambient quality of musical creation. Rickert (2013) argues that ambience is a melding of the material and the external wherein all contribute to the “achievement of the whole, from the base material structure to the achievement of the design to the feelings and thoughts that are evoked” (p. 6). Ambience brings in relief the “spatial, acoustic, and material properties” that fashion and are fashioned by “musicians’ attempts to get a certain sound by recording in a specific environment” (p. 8). It further suggests that musical genre and musical “grain,” to use Roland Barthes’ (1978) term, need not be limited to vocalists, lest one forget that soul’s germinal moments, those moments inside of the Stax’s studios in the early to mid-1960s wherein something called the “Memphis Sound” was blossoming, were the product of the coming-together of rhythm and voice, backbeat and groove, attitude and breath. Everyone followed the heartbeat of drummer Al Jackson Jr., and it was Cropper’s guitar that was given nearly as much attention on promotional materials for the Stax-Volt European Revue of 1967 as Otis Redding and Sam & Dave (Gordon, 2013, p. 93).

These moments are not incidental to the establishment of the soul genre; rather, they are absolutely instrumental to its conception. The interplay among a house band and its vocalists is different from the one between studio musician and vocalist. This is not to privilege one over the other, but merely to suggest that a house band is more deeply attuned with its environs—they are playing for the *house*, they are locating and defining the terms under which the arranger, the singer, and the producer interact. A house band develops a sense of continuity among artists, forging an identity that is conditioned by location and a sense of aesthetic “rightness.” While other drummers, bassists, and guitarists played inside Stax Studios, the fingerprints of Jackson, Dunn, Cropper, and Jones are all over Stax’s most definitive recordings. To ignore this rhythmic continuity, one made possible through the odd coincidence of studio location, neighborhood

racial demographics, and the spatial features of the studio's contours, is to ignore the complexity of interaction between race and musical sound. In the following section I want to further complicate these interactions by using the example of Daptone Records to describe how the soul genre continues to push at racially-inscribed genre borders through a commitment to the reclamation of forgotten sonic values. These values, as I describe, are conversant with soul's legacy of musical "borrowing" between races, and the sense of place and space that facilitated these exchanges. Instead of Memphis, Tennessee, our backdrop is now Bushwick Brooklyn at a crumbling old house dubbed The House of Soul.

The Daptone Sound

115 Troutman Ave. – Brooklyn, New York

While the legacy I described above is nearly 50 years old, Stax's influence continues to serve as a benchmark for the soul revival's most faithful interpreters. While the artists at Daptone Records admonish charges that their music is a play-act of facsimile and appropriation, their ears are nevertheless attuned to their predecessors' sense of spatial aesthetics. In the same way that the story of Stax Records is also a story of a city, a recording studio, and a commentary on the sonic interplay of races in the house band, Daptone Records is likewise emblematic of how soul music's contemporary adherents are equally guided by obligations to a strict set of sensibilities. There is a series of different musicians who comprise the house bands, the Dap-Kings and the Menahan Street Band, who back up the label's stalwart acts—Sharon Jones, Charles Bradley, The Budos Band, Naomi Shelton & the Gospel Queens, Antibalas, and the Sugarman Three. Most recordings are produced and engineered by label co-founder and Dap-Kings bassist Gabriel Roth, who won a production Grammy Award for his work on singer Amy Winehouse's multi-

platinum *Back to Black*. All of these artists record at the House of Soul, a crumbling house at 115 Troutman in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, New York. Like Stax Records in Memphis, the House of Soul was gutted and rebuilt by the musicians and label founders themselves, and one of the label's house bands, The Menahan Street Band, take their name from a prominent street that cuts through the heart of the neighborhood. Sharon Jones and Gabriel Roth did much of the electrical work for the studio, Charles Bradley rebuilt the stairs, The Budos Band knocked down walls, and Roth's mother sewed some of the curtains (YouTube, 2011). The ceiling was ripped apart to expose the beams, and the "live" room was built with found tires and lined with old clothes that Sharon Jones and others found themselves (YouTube, 2011)

Journalist Dan Daley of *Sound on Sound Magazine* described the House of Soul as "one of the last holdouts of the decade-long gentrification" of the neighborhood (Daley, 2008). The House of Soul is a ubiquitous presence in Daptone's promotional materials, merchandise, and vinyl records. The red-brick building often accompanies magazine profiles of Daptone, its exterior looking almost haunted and foreboding with its black wrought iron porch and ominous surroundings. In a promotional video titled "The Story of Daptone Records," the importance of the Bushwick location is played up, seemingly as a way of burnishing Daptone's outsider motif while also situating it within a soul music legacy that has always foregrounded place.

Daptone's "Brooklyn Sound" is in clear association with its surroundings. The promotional video begins with a shot of the Troutman Street sign with a bent one way street sign hanging below it followed by an overhead grid shot of the neighborhood with street names written in Sharpie ink. The next few shots feature an overhead view of a crudely painted street mural reading "Bushwick," and a street view emphasizing the neighborhood's graffiti, cracked

sidewalks, street murals, and abandoned bulletin boards. A 2014 *Wall Street Journal* video feature on black gospel singer Naomi Shelton similarly focuses on the nearby Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, New York. The feature story includes shots of a neighborhood grocery store, Tony's Grocery, with faded paint and slanted awning, as well as interior shots of Shelton's apartment that are interspersed with scenes of her recording within the House of Soul. The video and accompanying story by journalist Mike Ayers frame Shelton as an unmistakable product of her neighborhood, where she has lived for close to 40 years. While Daptone's identity is not as closely linked to its environs as Stax Records is with Memphis, the House of Soul is nevertheless a reminder that Daptone's emergence and identity is derived from a specific place whose values and aesthetics are as true as the sounds coming from the studio.

The neighborhood and the studio, like Daptone, are positioned as holdouts against the encroachments of the sleek, the gentrified, and the well-manicured. It also seems to latently signal that despite Daptone's white middle-class co-owner (Roth grew up the son of two attorneys) and nearly all-white backing musicians, it can be taken seriously as sufficiently gruff, downtrodden, and uncompromising. This functions as an homage to the mixed-race (and mixed-income) soul of Stax, but it also problematically reasserts a "crude reification," to use historian Brian Ward's (1998) language, of the "enduring belief that all real black music must be visceral rather than cerebral in character" (p. 265). Music from the gut, the logic seems to state, happens in the (black) ghetto unspoiled by white, upper-income gentrifiers. As a genre, therefore, soul's reemergence and reconnection with specific locales also trots in stereotypes that do, in fact, play into some caricatures of authenticity that reinforce problematic racial assumptions. This is not a central feature of the rhetoric, but rather, it merely offers an entry-point into a broader discussion of the mechanics of sound and the sense of presence and historical recollection that prompt

choices about sonic qualities. It does, however, speak to one key difference between Stax and Daptone.

While the Stax house band grew up in the neighborhood near McLemore Avenue, the musicians at Daptone are largely transplants from elsewhere, not products of Bushwick, Brooklyn. In this sense, the authenticity gleaned by the Daptone house band is one that must be more obviously promulgated. The seemingly authentic locale must be more actively identified in relation to the record label, rather than as an unremarkable feature whose remarkable status was conferred through the work of historians, as in the case of Stax. The foregrounding of Bushwick in these promotional materials suggests both an homage to McLemore Avenue and an implicit acknowledgment that the gritty locale is indicative of a gritty sound produced by a gritty house band. I turn my attention now to a discussion of Daptone's house band, its sound, and its recording studio, The House of Soul.

The House Band, Its Sound, and Its Studio

The omnipresence of the House of Soul in Daptone's promotional material is certainly the product of a savvy image-branding scheme, but what is more important is the connection made between its aesthetic appearances and its credibility as an incubator of a truer, more authentic sound. These descriptors often take on a time-capsule quality, relating the studio to some of soul music's most revered locales. As Daley explains, "When you hear Winehouse's 'Rehab' or Jones' 'Nobody's Baby' you experience a shift in time and place — you're suddenly in Detroit in 1965 or Memphis in 1962" (Daley, 2008). While Roth states repeatedly in interviews that the band is "not consciously trying to remake a record from 1962," his preferences seem to bely such an assertion, as Daptone's sonic profile shifts in-between conscious replication and

progressive appropriation (Daley, 2008). In his recording manifesto, an article in the obscure funk magazine *Big Daddy* called “Shitty is Pretty,” Roth argues that “it is best to get time-machine players. That is: genuine old-school players that think they are still in 1971. If this isn’t possible, your second choice is to get musicians who are so into rough old shit that they can willfully deny the influence of the last 30 years of music” (qtd in Wang, 2012, p. 209).

Such a comment suggests the intentionality of Daptone’s sonic preferences, and moreover, it makes obvious the ways in which these contemporary recording preferences and recording locales interweave with the legacy of Stax. Daptone co-founder Neal Sugarman is more direct in describing this conversation with the past: “There’s a certain organic aspect of the record that makes soul recordings from that time—they breathe a certain way. It makes us want to keep making them this way because no one else is” (Perry, 2012). Sarah Perry argues that “the sound of classic soul records was rich, direct, and had a palpable human presence to it” (Perry, 2012). These characteristics are nurtured at the House of Soul Recording Studio, whose confines exacerbate seeming anachronisms while encouraging musical presence, the embodied (and racially integrated) face-to-face encounters that gave Stax its spark of invention. As Roth explains, “I think one of the reasons why a lot of pop artists and major label stuff have tried to come into these rooms and tried to record with this group of people is because you can’t get that with studio musicians, and it’s not because those guys aren’t practicing, it’s because they’re not breathing together like we are” (YouTube, 2012).

These statements are self-aggrandizing to be sure, but the sentiments nevertheless express a lack of contentment with what passes for “soul” music in the contemporary era. The genre of soul music, as exemplified in the spirit of Stax Records, represents a tapestry of both intentional

choice and unintentional happenstance, both of which gave shape and contour to the genre. If, as I have suggested in previous chapters, soul music “elevates feeling above all else,” Daptone’s House of Soul predicates its existence on capturing mood, feeling, the intangible collective breath of a well-honed house band put into intimate confines and denied the conveniences of modern technology. It is obviously nearly impossible to apprehend precisely what triggers that elevation of feeling that is so instrumental to soul music. It does, however, make more intelligible the relationship between geography, the studio’s confines, and the resident house band, which work in seamless tandem to expand and frustrate easy categories of genre. When Roth argues that Daptone Records is reacting against “this bullshit acid-jazz, smooth R&B method” of recording, he is at once laying claim to an aesthetic preference but also attempting to reclaim soul as uniquely situated to get the audience and the musician to feel all there is to feel, to be affected through processes perceived to be natural rather than choreographed (qtd in Wang, 2012, p. 209). In Roth’s words, “There might be drama, but there’s never theatrics with soul music” (personal correspondence).

Gunn’s (2012) affective approach to genre is instructive in understanding how genre becomes hardened into static symbolic categories and is useful in making sense of what might be animating Roth’s concerns. Gunn argues that “as genres stabilize the forms they name, they begin to accrue symbolic value, deviating from feeling over time” (p. 369). Roth’s statements indicate that the passage of time has compromised one’s ability to be affected through soul, as the genre has deviated from its core principles and embraced technological modifications (auto-tune, digital recording) and sonic derivations (acid-jazz, and one of Roth’s favorite targets, the funk music of Parliament Funkadelic). While Gunn’s concern is with cinematic genre and affective response, Roth is pointing to the importance of recording technology and the attuned

response that a certain group of racially mixed musicians get by all playing together in a studio that captures “a sound’s ambient fulfillment” (Rickert, 2013, p. 8). In a discussion of Led Zeppelin drummer John Bonham’s drum sound on “When the Levee Breaks,” Thomas Rickert argues that the band’s choice to record in a former poorhouse in East Hampshire, England, “captured not just Bonham playing the drums or just the drums responding to the room but the room responding to the drums” (p. 8).

Similarly, the House of Soul plays into Daptone’s expectations for how sound is fulfilled, how it is energized to capture affectations requisite to soul music as it should be played. In the same way that Stax’s hand-built studio, geographical location, and arranging preferences situated the sound in ways that exacerbated certain features, Daptone’s House of Soul, in its sympathy with the Stax model, likewise uses its material environs to catalyze those affective responses. Guitarist and sometimes producer Thomas Brenneck of the Dap-Kings and Menahan Street Band goes as far as to argue that the Daptone sound can be entirely attributed to Gabe Roth’s astute observations of how sound and environment interact. Brenneck asserts that “If you take away the songs and just listen to the sound, that is Gabe manipulating that house to sound incredible” (YouTube, 2011). Roth likewise states that the label’s number one resource is the way the studio responds to its musicians (YouTube, 2011).

Part of this is certainly attributable to how the sound is actually captured. Daptone Records are nearly always recorded straight to tape on eight tracks using an Ampex machine from 1969, and editing is done using razor blades to splice together tape (Daptone Studio Tour, 2010). This is a practice that seems so outmoded that Roth himself has acknowledged that studio executives and some musicians raise their eyebrows at such choices (Daley, 2008). Recording to

tape allows for a different frequency range than digital recordings, ensuring that the top harmonics of instruments like violins, flutes, and horns are fully captured on the recording (Daptone Studio Tour, 2010). It would therefore be disingenuous to ascribe sole agency to the House of Soul itself, but these intentional choices are also the productions of affective intuition. The sounds are cut to tape, but it is captured on microphones of varying sorts, from top-of-the-line Shures to cheap Radio Shack models (personal correspondence). The thought process guiding choice of microphone and mic-ing techniques is resistant to formula. Roth is notoriously reticent to describe microphone techniques or recording tricks, opting instead to only suggest that he is guided by perception and intuition. He is frequently asked to explain his recording techniques, but usually the answer is honest but vague. “So they’ll (sound engineering magazines) say, ‘where do you put the mic on the drums,’ and I’ll say, ‘wherever it sounds good.’ And they think I’m being a smart ass, but it’s true, man. We’ll try it here, we’ll try it there, we’ll put it by your feet, we’ll put it underneath the bass drum, we’ll put it behind your head, we’ll hang it from the ceiling” (personal correspondence). In the same way that some Stax sessions were the product of one-track analog tape recordings and sometimes spontaneous impulse, Daptone’s approach is necessarily one that embraces the limits imposed by the manual, labor-intensive process. In this sense, the tape machine, the primitive environs, and the seemingly antiquated mic-ing choices are all equal contributors to a specific type of historically-informed sonic profile.

Jean-Paul Thibaud (2002) describes the sort of sonic profile embraced by Daptone as an ambient one, as it situates us in “a certain bodily and emotive disposition” (qtd in Rickert, 2013, p. 7). Brenneck and Roth’s perception that their sound is spoken through the walls of the House of Soul is both cognizant of how sound can be manipulated, but also unsure of what it is exactly

that is inducing that sound's fulfillment. It nevertheless is contributing to a sonic disposition in which artist and environment are concomitantly interwoven and symbiotically matched. Such a process is an ambient one to be sure, and, as Rickert argues, such attunements are rarely the product of pure intentionality (p. 43). As work by Barthes (1978), Rickert (2013), Lundberg (2009), Gunn (2012), and so much popular music scholarship makes clear, scholars are always limited by language, adjectives, and symbols in rendering intelligible the relationship between feeling, form, and environment. One can manipulate variables, shape environments, choose "natural" locales, edit, rework, and splice sound, but there inevitably seems to exist something irresolute that coaxes certain affective responses from certain recording settings. When Steve Cropper, for example, hears Otis Redding sing for the first time inside Stax Records, he speaks wistfully about the hair rising on the back of his neck, of a certain feeling whose affective power hardly translates to adequate description ("Respect Yourself"). Similarly, Daptone performers speak of the House of Soul in equally imprecise terms. For example, Brenneck states that "there's nothing too magical about that place (House of Soul). You sit in there and play music, and it's dusty and raggedy, and you're like 'get me the hell out of here,' but it sounds like magic" (YouTube, 2011).

Such a statement is an articulation of the elusiveness of feeling that so often accompanies narratives of the Daptone soul-revival. These suggestions coalesce into a sonic disposition; a receptivity to certain preconditions that interact and respond to the intensities of sound that flow between a racially integrated house band. As I have shown, Daptone Records is guided by the prevailing aesthetic wisdom of its predecessors, conforming to traditional generic expectations about sound, place, and recording techniques while simultaneously resisting discourses of authenticity that are reductively rendered to conform to oversimplified narratives about race

relations in the history of soul music. In the concluding section I further elucidate these ideas while also offering some closing thoughts on the relationship between geographic place, recording studios and their musicians, and the sound produced in those spaces.

Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter for a reorientation among scholars working within the interdiscipline of popular music studies as a way of reconciling some of the tensions between critical-cultural scholarship and musicological perspectives. As I described, critical-cultural scholars have offered illuminating scholarship detailing the effects of the market on musical consumption and the pervasive commercial presence that too often succeeds in simplifying genre distinctions to enhance power and consolidate influence. However, as prominent musicologists like Robert Walser, Susan McClary, and Allen Moore have persuasively argued, such approaches often neglect, in the simple words of Walser (2003), “why people are drawn to certain sounds specifically and not others” (p. 21). As Walser and Allen Moore (2003) argue, like any technical academic discipline, musicologists may articulate notions of, for example, a perfect cadence or a “gapped melodic contour,” and yet these terms may seem hopelessly pedantic to those who regard music as a type of “magic” that cannot be understood by those not versed in the grammar of musicological analysis (p. 6). While several scholars working within rhetorical studies and sound studies, such as Jonathan Sterne (2012), Greg Goodale (2011), and Joshua Gunn et al. (2013), have made some inroads in establishing a place for rhetorical analysis of sound, these inquiries have failed to produce much in the way of a method or an unambiguous technique. Too often these approaches seem to hint at analysis that is far closer to the work of a musicologist, and therefore, suggests a more formal training in the intricacies of sound and

musical composition. As a complement to these approaches, and as a way of ironing out some of the ambiguities, I have chosen to adapt elements from these interdisciplinary agendas by suggesting other loci of analysis that directly bear on musical sound and the notion of “authentic” soul music. I have argued that the neighborhood and geography that incubates a recording studio’s location have a fundamental and essential place in understanding how musical genres become recognizable.

These locations, such as the Stax location in Memphis, brought together a mixed-race group of neighborhood musicians who brought with them a palette of stylistic influences (Steve Cropper’s country, Al Jackson’s backbeat) that are unique to Memphis, Tennessee. Moreover, I have suggested that the recording studio’s spatial contours, the producer and engineer’s choice of recording equipment, and the label’s selection of a stable “house” band helped establish the metrics against which contemporary soul music, like that produced by Daptone Records, measures itself. Daptone’s solidarity with Stax’s recording preferences, studio configurations, and house band model, suggests a deliberate attempt at providing continuity between sound, aesthetics, and style. While Daptone’s music might be lauded for its consonance with a truer, more authentic sound, it might just as easily be seen as a deliberate attempt to recreate a time and place out-of-touch with modern realities.

If traditional soul music can be praised as a soundtrack and backdrop for the 1960s Civil Rights struggle, then one can argue that the *sound* of that music endures as a reminder of that time period and as a trigger for reflection on its most volatile moments. When Daptone attempts to recreate some of these sonic choices (house band, outmoded engineering) and geographical aesthetics (crumbling studio in mixed-race neighborhood), it is an explicit acknowledgment of

this era of soul music history, with all of its accompanying narratives of both racial conflict and racial harmony. As these memories continue to disappear, along with the performers and audiences that hold those memories, soul music must continuously revive and reinterpret this legacy if it is to remain an identifiable genre. Soul music's legacy, as I have explained, is one of period-specific features of style and aesthetics, groove and geography, space and serendipity, and these qualities can sometimes overburden modern interpreters with unrealistic demands on how they should go about producing that sound. What is critical for scholars within the interdiscipline of sound studies to acknowledge, however, is that while these demands may produce an avowedly honorific response, their placement in completely different contextual circumstances creates an odd juxtaposition of sound and style that both produces and reflects new misgivings and hesitations. It would not be enough, therefore, for musicologists to show with technical precision that Daptone's sound is a note-for-note replication, or for critical-cultural scholars and sociologists to brush aside Daptone as a retro-novelty of fleeting importance; rather, these approaches obscure how sound fits into a broader collection of anxieties over issues as diverse as gentrification in Bushwick, Brooklyn and the material processes that anoint one a true craftsman-musician. Understanding that these forces—geography, environment, space, place—compose a true constellation of competing forces that influence sound can give rhetorical and popular music scholars a firmer grasp of how sound becomes attuned to its environment.

As acknowledged in the introductory chapter, style, posture, performance, and sound are a few of the avenues through which soul musicians perform their authenticity. In the concluding chapter I wish to summarize these sites of authenticity while also suggesting some ways that authenticity might be once again made useful within rhetorical scholarship. Further, I offer a few

concluding thoughts on the future of popular music scholarship by suggesting some future directions for the study of the politics and aesthetics of authenticity in soul music.

Chapter 6: Will the Shitty Always Be Pretty?

In its many optimistic variations, the concept of authenticity has been employed as a moral aspirational ethic, a marker of conferred status, a principle of self-actualization, and a barometer of worth, value, merit, and originality. Its believers tout this generous latitude of meaning as characteristic of its openness, spontaneity, and self-generating capacity to inspire self-improvement. This carries with it, undoubtedly, a burdening weight of anxiety and a worrisome and lingering sense of doubt that accompanies those moments where one cannot contend with the pressures of being true to oneself. This has led some to dismiss any notion of a “true” self as merely an unverifiable whim of fantasy with little illuminating value. Numerous popular books, such as Andrew Potter’s (2010) *The Authenticity Hoax*, Yuval Taylor and Hugh Barker’s (2007) *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music*, and philosopher Simon Feldman’s (2015) *Against Authenticity: Why You Shouldn’t Be Yourself*, dispel the wisdom of authenticity as an attainable ideal worthy of our pursuits and energies. It is a hoax and a fabrication offering misguided directives, false senses of rationality, and a dubious tendency for reactionary responses. As Feldman (2015) argues with plainspoken certainty, the authenticity ideal “does not help us figure out how to make good choices nor does it help us to live better lives” (p. 3).

In these conceptions, the expectations of authenticity actually constrict and foreclose opportunity; the sense of certainty that comes with authentic living narrows the range of possibilities to only a select few, with those nonconforming possibilities cast aside as meritless distractions or compromising diversions. It is certainly true that the burdens of achieving consonance in thought and action sometimes leads one to mistake certainty for efficacy, or

resoluteness for wisdom. If these attempts at knowing oneself are futile quests full of directionless soul-searching, then the social practice of authenticating, or conferring “authentic” status to others, might be seen as equally prone to rigidly steadfast judgments and stereotyped expectations. Cultural anthropologist John L. Jackson (2005) makes this argument by suggesting that authenticity “explains what is most constraining and potentially self-destructive about identity politics” (p. 12). Borrowing from philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah’s notion of identity “scripts,” Jackson argues that such authenticity-bound narratives function to make “social differences appear absolute and natural” (p. 13). Authenticity, in Jackson’s view, is not attendant to “interiorized intent,” and those attempting to use it as a guiding principle demonstrate a troubling preoccupying obligation to operationalize, verify, and domesticate identities in an attempt to “predetermine social possibility” (p. 13). Such a process functions to render others as identifiable, scripted objects rather than as living subjects with varying inclinations and commitments (p. 18).

Jackson’s critiques, and those of Potter, Taylor & Barker, and Feldman, speak to broader concerns about how the ideal of authenticity can be used to legitimate ostracizing social practices, as those not fulfilling the requirements of the script are either pulled in conflicting directions or disposed of entirely. If this is true, where does this leave the concept of authenticity, especially as I have conceived of it in previous chapters? If the quest for authenticity only presents a mere charade of self-fulfillment, if it confines one to live life in the service of preordained and narrowly defined aspirations, then why pay attention to it at all? Hoaxes, the logic would say, should be revealed, scrutinized, dispelled, and disposed of and should only become the object of inquiry when serving these critical goals. This project, in many ways, has sought to reclaim the concept of authenticity as not merely a throwaway dictum (“be true to

yourself”) or as an absurdly arcane theory of self-fulfillment or self-improvement. Rather, authenticity like any guiding principle, moral value, or ethical tenet, should be celebrated for its attentiveness to intention and originality, but also critiqued for its unreasonable expectations of purity and essence; championed for its utility as an explanation for the beautiful and sublime, but also scrutinized for its tendency to constrict and subordinate. Authenticity, as this project has demonstrated, is not merely a concept to be located and “tested,” but rather, should be understood as the consolidation of a series of associations, practices, judgments, and explanations. These associations form in the present but are in conversation with the past; they are burdened by historically informed expectations but reflective of present-day anxieties. They may purport to move with the spirit of the times, but they may also be slaves to *past* times, a phenomenon especially apparent in a culture of revivals, reclamations, second-acts, and sequels.

For these reasons, I spend the rest of this concluding chapter further illuminating the relationship between soul music’s present with its past. The following will proceed in two parts. First, I will demonstrate the ways in which this relationship has played out over the preceding chapters, paying careful attention to the ways that the soul revival continues to be viewed within a Civil Rights-era frame. As part of that section, I will engage with some recent criticism that reinforces this frame by employing problematic assumptions about the relationship between politics and aesthetics. Second, I offer some methodological and theoretical suggestions for scholars working within the interdiscipline of popular music studies in order to better account for the enduring utility of authenticity as an aspirational ethic.

Soul Music’s Past and Present

In its best moments, as the previous chapters have demonstrated, soul is a genre through which afflictions of the spirit and anxieties of the mind are denied their incapacitating pull. Pains of the soul are reimagined as rapturous and affirming rather than as dispiriting and demoralizing. These pains provide the soundtrack to movements, the backdrop to eras, and the expressions of both individual and collective consciousness. As philosopher Joel Rudinow (2010) has argued “with all seriousness,” it is no coincidence that soul music is “called by a name evolved over millennia to point to the unfathomable spiritual dimensions of life” (p. 2). As I have shown, this sort of expectation proves soul music to be especially burdened by the demands of authenticity. It requires the performer to speak in visceral expressions, to reach into his or her hidden depths to capture an essence, to cry out in exaltation, and to be moved by rhythm and groove. This is an obviously improbable requirement, as it is impossible to judge whether or not the soul has spoken, or whether that soul speaks through an authentic self.

Nevertheless, this requirement has accompanied soul music from its inception. Soul, as these case studies have demonstrated, is more than just a convenient genre label; its connotations provide standards of judgment, criteria for evaluation, and suggestions for style, movement, and aesthetics that, unfortunately, have often laid the foundation for troubling appraisals of racial purity. Soul music, for better or worse, has been identified as a distinctly “black” American art form, and while this particular observation may empower soul musicians and their fans to take ownership of their creative output, it also ushers in troubling stereotypes unwittingly imposed by forces that sometimes seem well-intentioned. Soul musicians, the logic goes, are unbridled in their emotional outpouring; their flourishes of creativity are provoked by spontaneous breakthroughs and developed in stream-of-consciousness improvisations. Time and time again this sort of narrative has functioned as a way of subtly and not-so-subtly suggesting that black

musicians are guided by their emotions at the expense of their intellects and their bodies at the expense of their minds. In Chapter 2, I documented inconsistencies in these sorts of narratives of soul music history, showing how this sort of conventional wisdom is regulated by a series of dichotomous oppositions which often privilege inaccurate and misunderstood interpretations over other, more sensitive and nuanced readings. These sorts of narratives perform an authenticating function, as soul music's legacy is divided along racial, geographic, sonic, and environmental lines that separate the authentic from the inauthentic. Among the paradoxes, the soul music perceived to be the "blackest" and most authentic had the highest amount of white participation, while those with the "whitest" sound were overseen almost exclusively by black musicians and management. Such acknowledgments point out the fallacies in logic exercised by those who elevate a soulful racial "essence" as the chief characteristic of musical authenticity. As I have argued throughout this project, this logic hovers over soul music's latest incarnations, shaping the sound of the songs and the interpretations made about soul's place in the legacy of American popular music.

What I have pointed out continuously, however, is that when historical legacy envelops contemporary understanding, critics—both the academic ones and non-academic ones—fail to notice just how sweeping an indictment soul music's modern practitioners are making about the environs within which they find themselves. In Chapter 3, I documented the case of Daptone Records, whose faithful revival of the sonics of traditional soul is premised on the assumption that modern popular music aesthetics has been thoroughly debased by technological advancements. This critique might get lost, I have argued, because many critical-cultural approaches to popular music scholarship foreground context at the expense of musical sound,

forgetting the obvious fact that musicians have been schooled to dexterously manipulate sound to produce certain effects on audiences.

This occurs, no doubt, under certain contextual circumstances, but this is not the only relevant heuristic for musical analysis. Under this assumption, I investigated the ways in which neighborhood, place, space, and recording studio worked serendipitously to initiate a trans-historical conversation between Stax and Daptone Records. This conversation is one through which ideals about the authentic are processed through memories, fragments, recollections, and imaginations about those circumstances necessary to evoke “truer” sounds. This conversation is one redolent of moral concerns about the future, an anxiety that only gets satiated once the demands of the past receive their faithful adherence. As Chapter 4 indicated, such an indictment can also give way to a hopeless defeatism animated by nostalgic longing and wistful retrospection. In the case of the Numero Group record label, such wistfulness and reclamation runs the risk of racial paternalism, as those being “reclaimed” are prompted to filter their stories and memories through Numero’s archivists. The archive, in this sense, becomes the chief repository for authenticity, as these objectively rendered accounts redeem these musicians for their perseverance and integrity while also inaugurating the archivists themselves as authentic purveyors of exquisite taste and judgment. Numero Group’s success indicates that authenticity is a threatened commodity whose longevity requires it be tracked down, collected, packaged, narrativized, and endorsed by those uniquely qualified for such stewardship.

These case studies demonstrate, at the very least, how soul music continues to invigorate American civic life with an experience of communal appreciation. If you believe those who celebrate soul’s exultance, this experience is one denied to them by society’s most alienating and

isolating features. Soul music is built upon repetitions of groove, and I argue that its endurance and reemergence owes much to the ways that these repetitions inspire a collective release, a loosening of inhibitions and an abandonment of self-consciousness that provokes even the most reticent to tap their toes and bob their heads. Noted cultural theorist Paul Gilroy (1998) has suggested that the soul music revival “expresses a yearning for a scale of sociality, which is denied everywhere. It speaks to the desire for an authentic, face-to-face version of democratic interdependence and mutuality” (p. 256). Gilroy sees the soul revival as a response to the degradation of “black public culture,” an acknowledgment that foregrounds soul’s originations in black experience without denying that soul represents a “way of becoming brothers and sisters that is both secular and open to all, at least in theory” (p. 256).

What is curious, however, is that Gilroy’s celebration of soul’s revival is simultaneously muted by an insistence that such a revival is “nothing more than nostalgia for the social” (p. 257). Gilroy’s argument suggests such a “democratic mutual interdependence,” like that forged among the earliest practitioners of soul, can only “register” as temporarily significant because it seems so distant, so unreachable, and so out-of-time compared to present-day realities (p. 257). Retro-soul thereby becomes a mere attempt to approximate the togetherness of an era unblemished by alienating uncertainties and cynical evaluations. Authenticity in soul music is thus perceived to be nothing more than an unsatisfied yearning, a perception to be admired melancholically without too much accommodation made for naming the conditions that might signal its reemergence. It is, as I have indicated, so difficult to make sense of contemporary soul music without continual, persistent reference to the contextual features that shaped its Civil Rights-era origins. Gilroy’s evaluation, one that is latently reinforced in the style and sound of Daptone and overtly promulgated by the Numero Group, might also be viewed as a suggestion

that soul music is not a properly matched response to present-day social, cultural, and racial complications. As such, soul music can only be witnessed through retrospection, and any modern interpreter must be saddled with the unfortunate status of a retro act.

However, I think this does much disservice to the legacy of soul music and to the variation of experience and intellect that audiences bring to its contemporary iteration. Despite its seeming simplicity, soul music's richness of expression cannot be so easily relegated to dustbins and archives, an action that is too often performed with an effortless nonchalance that belies soul's transcendent cross-generational reach. It does not seem likely that modern audiences of Sharon Jones & the Dap-Kings or Charles Bradley are gravitating to the music purely as an act of vicariousness, as a way of reproducing the feelings of mutuality and shared solidarity that came from the activism of the Civil Rights era. Moreover, as previous chapters have demonstrated, the notion that early rhythm and blues and soul musicians were on the frontlines of Civil Rights demonstrations simply has no basis in historical fact in the first place (Ward, 1998). It is absolutely essential, therefore, that soul music's immense popularity be viewed as more than just a strategy to evoke nostalgic longing for a more harmonious, less disaffecting time. It does not serve the legacies of Aretha Franklin, James Brown, and Otis Redding well to perceive their music and influence as indelibly wedded to the eras from which they were born, nor does it do justice to their art to view them as one-to-one reflections of unique contextual circumstance. An acknowledgment of traditional soul's legacy by contemporary soul performers might just as well function as aesthetic or attitudinal homage rather than as an embrace of the real or imagined politics of a bygone era.

This is not to say, however, that contemporary soul music has no relationship to its past, it is just that this relationship has been modified in terms of scope and object of concern. Throughout this project I have suggested that contemporary soul music has a strategy and logic that evokes traditional soul's sonics, aesthetics, and style, not necessarily its connotations with overt racial struggle and social movement politics. In this way, Daptone and Numero Group offer object lessons in the ways that popular music scholars across the humanities have struggled to apprehend the often confusing and contradictory relationship between art, artists, and their contexts. This produces a dizzying matrix of possible explanations for why some musicians wallow in obscurity, however brilliant and "authentic" their contributions, while others coast to national prominence with a transparent superficiality that even they acknowledge. As much as possible, I have tried to avoid imposing purely contextual explanations onto the discussions of contemporary American soul music. The details and nuances of soul deserve to exist as a product of intentions, manipulations, and logics that do not always find easy social and political corollaries. This absolutely should not discount such attempts, but rather it is merely to suggest that there is an ephemeral quality to making music that cannot always be adequately processed through features of context or in reference to past social movements. Because of this, I have chosen to foreground the words, styles, and sounds produced by the musicians themselves in as many instances as possible. Surely these are responses to material conditions, contextual factors, and market demands, but as Simon Frith (1996) has argued, understanding music's politics of identity has too often been limited by "the assumption that the sounds somehow reflect or represent 'a people'" (p. 269).

It is for these reasons that I have tended to dismiss such objections, like those raised by music critic Siddhartha Mitter (2010), who worry "about the separation between that [Civil

Rights era] context and the appreciation that a whole new audience has for it [soul music] now.” Mitter’s conviction—a sentiment subtly implied by sociologist Oliver Wang (2012) and overtly reinforced by *PopMatters* music critic Mark Reynolds (2008)—is premised on the expectation that black audiences seek out “black” music that speaks to their contemporary apprehensions. The assumption of Reynolds is that in the “black pop mind ‘now’ represents the reality of the current day and the hope for, or promise of, better days to come, while ‘then’ represents an unwelcome reminder of harder times and oppression left in the dust.” Reynolds’ suggestion is that black audiences are not drawn to Daptone Records because its retro sensibility is mismatched to black audiences’ need to “always chase innovation.”

Besides the unsupported generalizations about racial preference and taste (what exactly is the “black pop mind”?), such an argument continues to negate and dismiss the resilience of soul music and the resourcefulness of its contemporary innovators. It also places prohibitions on the forms of social critique that soul music is capable of making. While Reynolds might argue that black audiences’ dismissal of Daptone Records is the result of a wish to avoid Civil Rights-era pain—a suggestion that seems contrary to the genre’s transcendent commitment to overcoming such pain—the characterization misses the appeal entirely. Moreover, it continues to reinforce an unnecessary obligation on its contemporary performers by suggesting that their supposed recreations must achieve harmony of thought and expression with those originators they are purported to imitate, that their posture and stance ought to be one directed at an audience capable of comprehending Movement-era politics.

While Reynolds, Wang, and others may subtly acknowledge the Daptone audience’s avoidance of a Civil Rights-era frame for contemporary soul, it nevertheless exists as reductive

critical shorthand, as a way of consolidating an entire audience's frame of reference to a specific point of time that many of them were not alive to experience in the first place. Beyond soul music, the Civil Rights-era frame has persisted as an encompassing reference point for other contemporary social and political controversies with racial implications. Some very recent scholarship, such as that of Clarence Lang (2015), argues that the frame of the Civil Rights Movement has sometimes been misapplied to contemporary circumstances, used as an enveloping point of reference that tends to obscure nuance in both the Movement and in the present-day circumstances to which it supposedly offers guidance and illumination.

While Lang's concern is that such a frame disrupts one's ability to understand the present-day harms of neoliberalism and the erosion of social services on minority communities, it is rendered with equal inflexibility when discussing the appeal of contemporary soul music. The Civil Rights-era frame becomes a convenient one because it has endured, as Lang's book has shown, as an immortal moment with ubiquitous appeal, as a touchstone for inspiration and a model of resilience and sacrifice. However, as this project has demonstrated, soul music's origins resist being categorized simply as a product of a social movement, or as an easily recognized expression of overt political will. Classifying soul music along these constraints obscures the universality of its appeal, burdening its contemporary musicians with the responsibility to dutifully adhere to Movement expectations with a delicate propriety and abject modesty. When critic Siddhartha Mitter criticizes Daptone for failing to adequately acknowledge that soul music is "race music, a music of struggle," he not only mischaracterizes the aspirations of soul's original purveyors, he also troublingly insists on a one-to-one relationship between aesthetics and politics, suggesting a type of purity of original contexts that is even more creatively stultifying than anything Daptone could possibly conjure on its own. In Mitter's view, Daptone is

“exploitative” and “colonial” because its audience is primarily white and it has white musicians who back up black singers. Interestingly, Mitter wants to insist that contemporary soul fans be aware of the genre’s history of struggle while selectively ignoring that this music of struggle was curated by mixed-race bands sometimes playing for almost exclusively white audiences, as in the case of Stax’s famed 1967 tour of Europe which, captured on video, reveals an almost entirely white audience. Moreover, as historian Brian Ward (1998) argues, many Movement leaders doubted the efficacy of soul as a forum for revolutionary politics precisely because of its “obvious popularity with whites” and for its too-prevalent white ownership structures (p. 409).

This is absolutely not to suggest that traditional soul music was absent of exploitation—it certainly was not—but it is not helpful or very critically imaginative to suggest without qualification and in the absence of any evidence that Daptone is equally exploitative simply because of the racial composition of its band and audience. As I have shown throughout this project, soul music’s racial affiliations, those cultivated in studios, neighborhoods, off-the-cuff jams, and spirited improvisations, are precisely what it is about this genre that remains a sense of inspiration for its modern interpreters. So, for example, when Amanda Nell Edgar (2014) argues in her discussion of authenticity and soul music that “the racialized borders that structure popular music’s genres” are only “fluid and permeable for those in positions in power,” I am left bewildered at the sense of defeatism in such a pronouncement and even more confused by its complete inability to consider the content of the music itself as an issue of concern. For these reasons, I would like to use the remaining few pages to provide a few suggestions for how scholars working at the intersection of popular music studies and rhetorical criticism might better account for the concepts of authenticity and nostalgia.

“Authentic” Soul’s Politics and Aesthetics

As the previous chapters have demonstrated, it is beneficial for scholars working within the interdiscipline of popular music studies to broaden their methodological and critical-deductive approach in order to better account for the nuances that accompany the imagination and innovations of the creative artist. Throughout this project I have indicated that rhetorically-informed popular music criticism can be at its most illuminating when it is attuned to the processes under which art is created. Sometimes the process is simply one of archiving, of reclaiming, of repackaging, of telling an eventful story. Other times it is useful to turn towards a crumbling not-quite-gentrified neighborhood in Brooklyn where platinum records are hung on the wall above a toilet and the prevailing ethos is to make something shitty into something pretty. As I have suggested throughout the preceding chapters, the creative process of making soul music relies on the deft manipulation of specific physical settings, wherein the performers come to embody their performance spaces and inhabit their material surroundings. These features are not incidental to the way the music is interpreted; they are, in fact, instrumental in shaping its appeal and influencing who it is that hears that appeal. Ignoring the intention of the musician and the dynamic interactions they have with one another, as too much purely deductive critical-cultural scholarship tends to do, have the much broader effect of further abstracting the musicians from their music.

Most crucially, some popular music scholarship often views the principle motive of artistic expression as overt social-political critique, as if the musician’s or artist’s primary role is to steward an easily identifiable politics or to embody without abstraction the symptoms of the culture within which he or she operates. I have tried to avoid such a blunt approach throughout

these chapters, mostly because doing so runs the risk of equating any piece of artistic expression as critically useful inasmuch as it can be read as possessing identifiers redolent of an already chosen theoretical template. This is the concern of novelist, essayist, and academic Curtis White (2003), who has argued that such an approach, which he sees as ubiquitous in cultural studies, fails to account for aesthetic difference at all (p. 65). As a result, reading artistic work of any kind within the humanities becomes merely an exercise in “reading after social symptoms,” wherein everything becomes one “discursive practice” to be placed among others without discernments made about artistic merit or cultural value (pp. 64-66). In these discussions, artistic form and the material processes that contribute to those forms are trivialized as unimportant because the already-chosen template determines what is to be taken from the work. As art critic Libby Lumpkin (1999) argues in *Deep Design*, scholars have become so preoccupied with viewing “art as philosophy that ... the term ‘form’ is censored or disparaged” (p. 112).

I believe Lumpkin’s insight is a critical one for those working at the intersection of rhetorical criticism and popular music studies because it focuses critical attention on how musical form is fundamental in understanding cultural critique and artistic intent. Musical forms, environments, sounds, and aesthetics ought not be relegated or diminished as a secondary concern for scholarship attempting to analyze popular music texts. What I argue is that without attention to how the sound, aesthetics, and environment have worked to manipulate that meaning, it leaves one with only an incomplete understanding of how music functions as cultural critique. The critique that music provides, I further argue, often is a direct result of the form of the music itself—the equipment used, the process of cutting tape, the placement of the microphones, and the sonic features of the studio, and radicalness of the style and imagery. In the case of soul music, these sound aesthetics (“shitty is pretty”) are absolutely fundamental in

understanding how these soul musicians overcome their own sense of alienation and isolation. Estrangement and alienation have always been central in soul music, but its ability to overcome, however intermittently and fleetingly, the burdens of such estrangement speaks to the uncommon depth of emotion exhibited by its performers. I have maintained through the preceding chapters that the concepts of nostalgia, authenticity, and alienation all in some way provide the resources and criteria for judging artistic merit. As I have explained, this is one of the reasons why critics ought to be even more concerned with them. However, they do more than this. As Alistair Bonnett (2010) argues, alienation, authenticity, and nostalgia “are imbedded in the very possibility of political life” (p. 171). Without these terms, Bonnett, argues, “virtually the entire set of other aspirations associated with the left—autonomy, freedom, equality—become suspect” (p. 171).

And so there is something to be lost by abandoning authenticity, and there is important work to be done in establishing nostalgia as a term not exclusively limited to regressive, retrospective longing. If there is a central theme to this project, it is that the intentions and inclinations of contemporary soul musicians matter not only as reflections of prevailing social values, nor simply as duplications of prior contexts, but as a living and breathing contribution to future possibilities. As Sharon Jones herself sings, “A woman like me can stand the test of time ... now 50 years of soul gone by and 50 more to come. You think you’ve seen something but Lord I’ve just begun.” Sharon Jones is only beginning, and so too am I just beginning to understand why exactly this music, against conventional wisdom and marketplace logic, has indeed stood the test of time. Soul DJs across the country continue to spin vinyl records in sweaty, dark basements from Chicago, Illinois to San Francisco, California to Lawrence, Kansas. I know this because I have been in those sweaty basements, moving my arms, swiveling my hips,

sliding my feet, and when the spirit moves me, spinning around on my toes with a surprising gracefulness that continues to confound my friends and acquaintances. There is something to be said for a music that elicits this type of reaction 50 years after its supposed heyday, that gets someone like myself—usually so reserved—to begin dancing crazily with friends and strangers alike. And so, to borrow an expression from scholar Lawrence Grossberg, I will continue to “dance in spite of myself,” and the Numero Group and Daptone Records will continue to provide the music for me and thousands of others to do so too—to lose ourselves in the moment when the needle hits the groove, when it all becomes straight love and no chaser.

Some Final Notes on Soul Music’s Future

Throughout this dissertation I have described authenticity as an anxious, sometimes contradictory term—simultaneously burdening and liberating, self-fulfilling and hollowing, animated by a resolute sense of purpose and anchored by a rigid set of inviolable expectations. Soul music’s audiences have always been enlivened by the genre’s purity of essence, and although this is merely a perception, it has nevertheless prevailed with a surprising, enduring stamina. While this purity of spirit has been sanctified by audiences of all backgrounds, it has not always been accepted unreflexively or understood as transcendent of the animosities that conditioned its arrival. The anxiety that accompanies understandings of authenticity in soul music is therefore one characterized by a tension between the genre’s interiors and exteriors. Its interior content—the sound emanating from its performers—and its exteriors—the cultural politics and conditions under which the music is made.

This tension between soul’s content and its context will only become even more pronounced as contemporary audiences continue to embrace retro-soul sounds. The sonic content

of contemporary retro-soul retains a fidelity with vintage soul music, and the context has done nothing but become even more receptive to that fidelity. Just over the course of the few years that this dissertation was written, contemporary retro-soul music has been elevated from a burgeoning novelty to a ubiquitous popular culture presence. Daptone artist Charles Bradley has moved from a club act to a celebrated theater act; Sharon Jones was nominated for a Grammy Award and has a documentary set to arrive in 2016. Retro-soul performers Nathaniel Rateliff and Leon Bridges are radio staples and genuine stars, and the Numero Group has continued to win critical acclaim for its archiving and repackaging of long-forgotten soul music. The trends outlined in the preceding chapters have endured long enough to no longer be called trends. Soul music, at least for the foreseeable future, has forcefully reasserted itself as an enormously profitable commercial enterprise seeking to reinvigorate and encourage a youthful appetite for a more authentic sound.

As I have described in previous chapters, part of the appeal of retro-soul is its countercultural values—its refusal to succumb to the demands of clean production, clean image, or showboating artifice. Now that the music is more popular than ever, at what point does the authentic become inauthentic—at what point does that purity of essence start to look a little bit impure? Are these audiences, some retro-soul originators may argue, savvy enough to recognize that retro-soul is/was actually intended to be a critique of popular music and not just a reinforcement of its commercial logic? Am I proposing a false dilemma? I do not have comprehensive answers to these questions, but I do think that soul's unabated ascendance will continue to foreground disputes over authenticity. The problems of authenticity raised in this dissertation will only become more exacerbated, more visible, more rancorous, and potentially more fraught with ambiguity as the genre is introduced to even wider audiences. In other words,

the future of authenticity in soul music will continue to be an anxious one, and its future will be argued over with such stridency that soul's audiences and performers may signal a new direction, a new aesthetic, a new set of governing principles for aspiring acts to follow. Or perhaps none of this may happen. For a genre so encompassing, so rapturous, and so firm in its own sense of resolve, perhaps there is something to be lost in compromising now. Maybe the shitty will always be pretty.

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