

“IT TURNS OUT IT WAS QUITE A STATEMENT...” ROCK N’ ROLL’S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE PURSUIT OF RACIAL EQUALITY

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Music as a Catalyst for Change.

Musical artistry has always been a kaleidoscope reflecting the present cultural values and social climate. The icons of their era evoke conversation not only because of the chords they play and the lyrics they write but because of their statements and actions as influential persons of their time. One of the major touchpoints of the history of the rock and roll genre was its use as an instrument for racial integration in America. The issues pertaining to societal segregation and civil equality were paramount during rock and roll’s rise to acclaim. In the 1960’s specifically, there were important shifts in the way that major performers were changing precedents of musical discrimination. The efforts of such iconic acts as rock and roll bands, The Rolling Stones and The Beatles, would go on to create a dialogue about the previously neglected talent and influence of black artists and initiating a rejection of segregation within their traveling tours. These rock and roll bands profoundly cemented their legacy in history as not only a celebration of musical aptitude, but also as influential figures seeking equality for others.

The Rolling Stones, Breaking Barriers.

Throughout the history of the rock and roll genre many of the most notable hits have found success from songs that have roots in black music. Unfortunately, while these songs rose to fame attached to white performers, the black performers from which these hits were derived received a lack of equality of exposure and credit for their

genius. The Rolling Stones stood to be a significant example of the advancement of inclusion in music and in turn, society.

In Keith Richards' 2015 documentary *Under The Influence*, the legendary musician discusses this development in great detail, including a scene that features Richards recalling how he had never seen talent such as Muddy Waters or Howlin' Wolf on TV before, although many of the predominantly white bands featured on programs took influence from their music. He spoke of a time in which the exposure of black artistry was greatly limited and how he and his fellow bandmates felt compelled to use their platform to seek the recognition these black artists deserved. One such instance was when they invited blues luminary Muddy Waters to tour with them on their 1964 European Tour, "...playing to large, appreciative crossover crowds" (Open Culture, 2024). This feat challenged the public to appreciate the performer, uninhibited by their skin color on a platform that was unmatched at the time. The band would go on to tour and perform with many blues legends for which they credit influence within their own music. "They were in awe that we'd heard of them, we were in awe to meet them," Richards explains. "A mutual admiration society" (Neville, 2015).

These unparalleled performances would be followed by a feat of racial inclusion that was groundbreaking. In 1965, The Rolling Stones had a televised performance planned for the TV program *Shindig*. Prior to the show the band insisted that the show feature Howlin' Wolf, citing their attendance depended on it. This was extremely controversial of the time, the performances on this show largely being white, neglecting the talent of black artists by and large based on past precedent. The band's adamant insistence on inclusion was progressive for the time and the performance would be reflected on as an important moment for artful inclusion and a step towards racial equality. In reflection the show is thought to have, "...built a bridge over a cultural abyss and connected America with its own black culture...a life-changing moment,

both for the American teenagers clustered round the TV in their living rooms, and for a generation of blues performers who had been stuck in a cultural ghetto.” (Open Culture, 2024). The reception of the show was a sensation and to this day stands as a meaningful example of the ways that artists such as The Rolling Stones were a powerful minority of rock and roll performers standing up for racial equality through acts of collaboration and celebration.

The Beatles, Speaking Out.

Along with the commercial and credential exclusion of black musical artistry, the audiences of musical acts were also segregated and discriminated against, reflecting the social divide that existed during this period. However, The Beatles would go on to set an admirable precedent of inclusion with their platform of success. In 1964 the band committed an act of defiance against racial injustice that would unknowingly resonate in a profound way and shift the conversation of desegregation in the United States in a positive direction.

On their first world tour the Liverpool foursome traveled to the US and on their lengthy list of venues was the Gator Bowl in Jacksonville, Florida. Notably, upon finding out the venue was sanctioned to be segregated by race, the band refused to play the show. In The Beatles’ 2016 *Eight Days a Week* documentary, Paul McCartney recalled, “We were due to play Jacksonville in the States and we found out that it was going to be a segregated audience—blacks one side, whites the other—and it just seemed so mad, we couldn’t understand that. So we just said, ‘We’re not playing *that!*’” (Howard, 2016). Public statements by the band sent a ripple effect through the media. John Lennon once blatantly said in an interview, “We never play to segregated audiences and we aren’t going to start now.” (Lifton, 2020). The band went on to state they would prefer to forfeit their appearance fee and the exposure rather than to ever play a segregated

venue. With the pressure of The Beatles popularity bearing down on the consciousness of the venue, the officials of the concert eventually relented and for the first time since the complex opened, allowed the segregated audience to integrate for the performance. This act of desegregation would become a catalyst for conversation among other venues to rethink their position on this issue as well and create a change in precedent that was unheard of at the time. This act furthered the progress of the civil rights movement in ways that could not have been predicted by the band and in later years they would state they had no inclination of the impact their stance would have, but they knew they had to do the 'right thing'.

Taking it a step further, a year after the incident The Beatles continued to make history with a revision of their contracts that dictated that they, "would not be required to perform in front of a segregated audience" (Lifton). This addendum was the first of its kind and was an informal decision that the musical foursome wholeheartedly endorsed. The profound impact of this legal addition to The Beatles prospective performances and the band's public rejection of segregated music in the media would be part of the lasting legacy of the positive impact rock and roll musical groups had in the pursuit of racial integration and progress towards equality.

Final Thoughts.

As we glance back and analyze the collision between the development of rock and roll and the struggle of those facing segregation and discrimination in the sixties, we can see a decade of musical sensations using their influence to make statements and set precedents that had never been broached before. The Rolling Stones and The Beatles were instrumental in inspiring change through contributing to a conversation of progress that society was beginning to experience in the sixties. The rock and roll genre was ultimately a vessel for social change in favor of integration and inclusion. Whether their

efforts and the efforts of others like these musicians are considered subtle in the course of history or at the forefront, each contribution has resonated for generations. In the words of Paul McCartney, "So I'm very proud of that...you know, to us it was just common sense. But it turns out it was quite a statement." (Howard, 2016). ■

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