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Universal People: Audiovisual Experiments in Black Science Fiction, 1980-1986

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in Visual Studies

by

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Dissertation Committee
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DEDICATION

We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors.

Stanislaw Lem
Solaris

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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Though researching and writing this dissertation has entailed a great deal of solitary work, its completion reflects a tremendous amount of thought and support from many people. Even in my most isolated moments of listening to the same record over and over or rewriting sentences countless times, I was simultaneously engaged in a running dialogue with a host of mentors, colleagues and friends.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Universal People: Audiovisual Experiments in Black Science Fiction, 1980-1986

By

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This dissertation reimagines the paradoxical experiences of race in the early 1980s through the vantage point of an influential constellation of artists who experimented with science fiction themes, cutting-edge electronic instruments and digital imagery. My work identifies nuanced, often unexpected connections between expressions of interstellar fantasy and the lived conditions of race. At this historical juncture, Black communities across America were faced with an array of contradictory forces as systematic retreats by civic governments, economic disinvestment, and violent repression unfolded in sync with a growing celebration of Black cultural productions by mainstream America. I argue artists such as hip-hop pioneer Afrika Bambaataa, jazz great Herbie Hancock, and pop star Michael Jackson mobilized otherworldly, futuristic premises to create temporary spaces of safety, escape and pleasure within that confluence of racial oppression. Further, images and sounds of the galactic, the machinic and the cyborg provided galvanizing metaphorical vehicles to articulate concerns about the tensions and dire stakes that defined the contemporary conditions of possibility for Black life. By listening and viewing for key theories of "ensemble" and "synthesis," I show how these artists broadcast substantive arguments toward new possibilities for Black identities,

racial liberation, and a just, multicultural way of life. These statements were intertwined with broader cultural anxieties about racial Blackness, simultaneously registering the spiraling potential of those visionary projects as the twentieth century drew to a close. My investigation applies an interdisciplinary methodology that draws on media studies, social history and Black radical theory to analyze interviews, archival documents, vinyl records, artist notebooks, music videos, original artworks, costumes, and sociological theory and journalism of the time.

Introduction
"What good is science fiction to black people?"

In a 1982 profile of the emergent hip-hop phenomenon, Afrika Bambaataa, one of the culture's celebrated figureheads, reflected on his exposure in the national spotlight: "One thing we like to stress: Success will not make us big headed. Some people say, 'How does it feel to be a star?' We don't look at ourselves as stars. 'Cause stars fall. We want to be like the moon and stay put."[1] Bambaataa's statement outlined a commitment to keeping his cultural organization, a growing army of multitalented performers and adherents known as the Universal Zulu Nation, rooted in the Bronx even as its influence was already beginning to span the globe. The comment also refracts a range of other ideas. The cosmological wordplay displays the former gang leader's steeping in the Black radical thought of the Nation of Islam. Though Bambaataa offers a comparison, the relative permanence of the moon versus the stars, he also advances a metaphor for a change in Black political struggle. In a sense, his message is underwritten by an aspiration for the realignment of the power structures that shape everyday life on Earth, particularly that of the United States. The "moon" of Bambaataa and his crew might function with a different sort of gravitational force to re-ground America, if not the entire world. The comment is also implicitly a vision of the future, but one that is undeniably tethered to the past. What Bambaataa intends for the Zulu Nation to inspire—global alliances under the banner of peace, love, unity and having fun—is an idea entrenched in the group's germination in the Bronx community.

The opening epigraph is taken from Stanislaw Lem, *Solaris*, trans. Joanna Kilmartin and Steve Cox (New York: Berkeley Medallion, 1970), 80.

[1] Lynden Barber, "Afrika Bambaataa: Play It Again Bam," *Melody Maker*, October 20, 1984, http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/afrika-bambaataa-play-it-again-bam.

This statement foregrounds the core concerns of this dissertation, namely the status of racial Blackness, power, coalition and social change in America during the late twentieth century. The references to movements of astronomical bodies also serve to introduce a creative sensibility that my inquiry orbits around. I look to reimagine some of the paradoxical circumstances surrounding race in this period through a set of audiovisual productions that pointedly mobilized themes resembling science fiction. The resulting sounds and images, which span the galactic, the cyborg, and utopian environments, often relied on what were then cutting-edge electronic instrumentation and computer-based imaging techniques. More specifically, I listen to and look at Bambaataa's initial singles, most notably a drum-machine powered journey across the cosmos entitled "Planet Rock" (1982) that one critic preemptively hailed as "probably the single most influential record of the Eighties."[1] I also observe the work of Herbie Hancock, a jazz giant who preceded Bambaataa but at the time was following his lead into electro experiments. The keyboard player's hit single "Rockit" (1983) was marketed with a bizarre robot-driven video and then packaged with early computer art on the *Future Shock* (1983) album. Additionally, I assess the peculiar racial violence in *Captain EO* (Francis Coppola, 1986), a "4D" space musical featuring popstar Michael Jackson, who was arguably at the height of his powers when the attraction debuted at Disney theme parks in 1986. In following the shared aesthetic tendencies across this small but hugely instrumental constellation of performers, I identify nuanced, often unexpected connections between expressions of interstellar fantasy and the shifting sociopolitical dynamics surrounding racial Blackness.

Over the course of this investigation, I think within the mode of cultural history to assess key musical works and their accompanying visuals, both as aesthetic statements in

and of themselves but also as symptoms of their historical moments. I ask: Why these experiments with the interstellar at this stage in the late twentieth century? What does the mobilization of themes from science fiction accomplish for these artists at that time? What are the relationships between the musical ideas and aesthetics, both sonic and lyrical, and the visual iconography of the cosmos, the outlandish and the machinic? In what ways does such art tap into political and cultural currents circulating around space travel and exploration—and in what ways does it diverge? What range of futures does such modes enable these artists to envision? Why the concerted experimentation with electronics—drum machines, vocoders, synthesizers, samplers—and what do such tools open up for these artists? Ultimately, what might these artists and their works tell us about the potentials for liberation, equality, and justice for Black subjects at this juncture?

I contend that while their work projected ideas about what is to come, such premises were calibrated to negotiate and intervene in the treacherous race relations of the present moment, both in direct and indirect ways. Otherworldly, futuristic sounds and images presented vital conduits to expressive mobility and discovery. Further, the stuff of science fiction offered creative vehicles to articulate new possibilities for Black identities, racial liberation, and an equitable, multicultural way of life. Yet, these idealistic qualities remained bound up with broader cultural anxieties concerning Black life in America. In some cases, the artists also drifted into vexing considerations of race, particularly the seductive ideology of colorblindness. I argue that their audiovisual experiments in Black science fiction register a marked tension between forecasts of unconstrained existence in new worlds and the manifold actualities of everyday epistemic violence. As such, the artistic statements index shifting potentials for substantive justice and racial emancipation

on the ground in America, even as the twentieth century was drawing to a close. Their trajectory parallels a downward slope, both of conditions for many Black people and of the country's race relations, a twinned spiral enabled by a profoundly contradictory regard for the lives of people of color. Analysis of their contents and forms then thickens our understandings of how such pressures, which stemmed from longstanding anti-Black tendencies, manifested in that moment.

During this short but consequential window, America experienced the unfurling of a phenomenon historian Manning Marable characterized as the "modern racial paradox."[2] As I will detail, many Black citizens across the country were subject to an array of contradictory forces, as systematic retreats by civic governments, economic disinvestment, and violent repression unfolded in sync with a growing celebration of Black cultural productions by mainstream White America. A flourishing neoconservative ideology disavowed the persistence of racial oppression, hewing to the specious notion that the imperatives of the Civil Rights Movement had been met. The systematic undoing of legislative and social advances made in preceding decades was aided and abetted by conflicts playing out in the sphere of popular media. Persistent tropes—the social deviant and the success story—prevailed in the media landscape, images that buttressed claims that people of color either abused or no longer needed an extensive network of social programs designed to address racial disparities. Though high-profile Black celebrities, for example, Bill Cosby and Oprah Winfrey, would soon come to enjoy widespread acceptance, such individual inclusion overlapped with lingering efforts that excluded performers of color from popular commercial venues. For example, programming

[2] Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945-2006*, 3rd ed. (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 182-188.

policies at many FM radio stations and the fledgling MTV cable network effectively barred productions by Black performers. The artists in my study were quite aware of these media dynamics and mobilized science fiction as a means to circumvent, and, in some cases, disrupt their proceedings.

My bracketing of years is located around specific creative statements and events, as I begin with the debut of Bambaataa's recorded works in 1980 and conclude with the premiere of *Captain EO* in 1986. This span roughly describes the initial halcyon phase of a cosmically aligned, electro form of hip-hop before the genre shifted into what have become more familiar rugged sonic and lyrical modes.[3] Though the productions I examine were startlingly novel in their sound and uses of technology, much of their ingenuity and pleasures lie in how they appropriated elements from earlier soul, funk and disco works. This overlap and extension also pertains to the surrounding sociopolitical dynamics. My demarcations may signal a neat periodization, but I do not intend to suggest stark breaks with prior or subsequent moments. I argue, like many scholars have recognized, that the 1980s might be best understood as a period of transition, particularly in the cultural fields of America.[4] Just as the racial paradox of the 1980s might be traced back to anti-Black tendencies and political machinations of previous eras, it also laid groundwork for conflicts to come; for example, the "culture wars" and neoliberal legislation that exacerbated the racial asymmetries of poverty and mass incarceration. Closely observing works from this six-year period serves to diagnose and better

[3] Since its inception, electro has cycled through a series of revival phases in addition to heavily influencing other musical styles, including techno, Miami bass, house, and freestyle.
[4] See Robert M. Collins, *Transforming America: Politics and Culture in the Reagan Years* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 5; Bradford Martin: *The Other Eighties: A Secret History of America in the Age of Reagan* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011), xvii-xviii; Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.), 10-11; Gil Troy and Vincent J. Cannato, *Living in the Eighties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8-9.

conceptualize how the contradictory dynamics of cascading American race relations manifested and were experienced. The creative decisions and, in a sense, contortions these artists performed lay bare the morass of possibilities and demands that defined the shifting status of racial identity and belonging at that time.

"Not a time of progress"

Much of the political salience of these science fiction experiments lies in the way they resonate against, and in some cases directly respond to, legislative, economic and social events in this period, some background on which is crucial to my analysis. Such proceedings exacted a deeply asymmetric toll on lives of Black Americans, particularly those in an expanding contingent of urban poor or who had fought their way into the fragile middle-class status. While many Black communities became increasingly subject to a terrible kind of socioeconomic vacuum, their residents were demonized as hostile, even alien, to normative, i.e. White, American ways of life. As critics from the time described it, not only was this period, "not a time of progress" for Black Americans, the descent in conditions was shadowed by a corkscrewing of race relations toward "a new nadir."[5] Much of this had to do with the rightward turn in the country's politics that flourished with the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency and Republicans taking control of the Senate in 1980. The ascendant conservative ideology, which denounced the federal government as "the problem" constraining America's fiscal potential, cohered around a program that reduced taxes for the affluent and eviscerated funding for social

[5] See Vernon E. Jordan, Jr., "Introduction," in *The State of Black America 1980*, ed. James D. Williams (New York: National Urban League, 1980): iii; and Marable, 183.

welfare programs—all while dramatically escalating defense spending.[6] Along with dismantling supports many Americans relied on for basic living expenses, the administration appropriated language from the Civil Rights Movement as a means to cloak a sweeping offensive against established legal protections for people of color.

As many commentators discerned, these downward pressures and accompanying sundering of racial cooperation amplified under the Reagan administration but they were part of a much longer trajectory. John E. Jacob, then president of the National Urban League, outlined the dissolution in the organization's annual "State of Black America" report for 1985, writing: "In virtually every area of life that counts, black people made strong progress in the 1960s, peaked in the '70s, and have been sliding back ever since."[7] Concurrent with that assessment, Marable linked deteriorating conditions under Reagan's leadership to the preceding political administrations. As he argues, Richard Nixon's "law-and-order" approach to governance in the mid-1970s, which resulted in an array of state violence against Black organizations, laid the foundation for "a conservative restoration" that fully blossomed under Reagan.[8] In the interim years, despite Black voters playing a decisive role in Jimmy Carter's election, the Democrat advanced an agenda that was antithetical to their concerns.[9] His administration moved to restrict spending on social welfare, health care and education, all while ramping up the military, actions that became the hallmark priorities of his successor. But in the early 1980s, a once gradual dive in the Black condition gave way to a rapid free fall.

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[6] Some of the traction this political program gained might be attributed to a set of financial pressures, as the American economy oscillated between a period of recovery following the downturn of 1978 and the onset of another recession in 1981. Concerns about inflation, balancing the budget, and a persistent federal deficit emerged as top economic priorities under Reagan's administration.

[7] John E. Jacob, "An Overview of Black America in 1984," in *The State of Black America 1985*, ed. James D. Williams (New York: National Urban League, 1985), ii.

[8] Marable, 130.

[9] Marable, 167.

Even against this lineage, the Reagan administration's enmities toward Black life registered as nothing short of dramatic in their severity. Less than a year after his first inauguration, *The Economist* concluded that a "counter-revolution on civil rights is underway," explaining how Reagan's policies, "in the past, would have enjoyed most support among racialists and southern segregationists."[10] This claim was based in part on plans for the country's finances, which orchestrated the demolition of social programs that had historically enabled many Black Americans to gain more stable economic footholds. The 1981 budget, which Congress subsequently approved, targeted a wide swath of domestic programs funding food stamps, hundreds of thousands of jobs through the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, welfare benefits for families through the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, federal Medicaid and Medicare contributions, housing subsidies, unemployment-insurance benefits, student loans, energy-assistance, and grants for elementary schools.[11] Waves of cuts totaling billions of dollars arrived year after year in sync with an historic escalation of the military budget.[12] The result was an acute withering of initiatives that since their creation in the 1960s had rendered tangible material gains for scores of Black Americans.[13]

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[10] The magazine went further, arguing, "The new, harsher climate represents a victory for some of the nastier forces on the American right which have always baulked at civil rights laws." See "American Survey: Is Reagan turning his back on blacks?" *The Economist*, September 5, 1981, 21-22.

[11] It is worth noting that Reagan also pushed through tax cuts that disproportionately benefited wealthy White Americans. See Ken Auletta, "The Underclass—III," *The New Yorker*, November 30, 1981, 143, 150. Also see "Chronology of Events, 1981," in *The State of Black America 1982*, ed. James D. Williams (New York: National Urban League, 1982), 312-322.

[12] Marable ranks Reagan's defense spending as "the largest military expenditures in human history." Further, he pillories the administration's foreign policy, which emphasized military might, as guided by "a vision of white capitalist world supremacy." See Marable, 178-179.

[13] Though a conservative ethos drove the elimination of social programs, Democrats complied with little resistance. As Jacob put it in 1984, both parties "for the most part quietly acquiesced while the programs of the Great Society were torn asunder." See John E. Jacob, "An Overview of Black America in 1983," in *The State of Black America 1984*, ed. James D. Williams (New York: National Urban League, 1984), v.

The dismemberment of support for social programs was intertwined with attacks on civil rights laws. Reagan broadcast the ideological underpinnings of such an assault when he announced his presidential campaign in 1980. In a speech held in Mississippi near where three civil rights volunteers had been lynched less than twenty years earlier, he proclaimed support for "states' rights," evoking nostalgia for state-sponsored White supremacy.[14] Within months of taking office, an ethos of antagonism filtered through the executive branch, as various departments began obstructing and undoing federal efforts to combat racial segregation and foster equal opportunity that had long enjoyed bipartisan backing. In particular, the Justice Department assailed Affirmative Action as tantamount to discrimination against White people and took the unprecedented step of siding against people of color in so-called reverse discrimination lawsuits.[15] The administration also prevented the Internal Revenue Service from denying tax exemptions to segregated private schools, diminished anti-discrimination guidelines for federal contractors, and sought to weaken key provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.[16] In justifying such action, the administration hijacked aspirational language of the Civil Rights Movement, specifically the ideal of achieving a "colorblind" society." The ideological gymnastics that followed proffered a web of regressive notions that dispensed with the facts of enduring racial inequality. Overturning legal forms of segregation had ostensibly uprooted age-old forms of racial discrimination. In an official sense, the country's political and civic structures were colorblind given that race had been supposedly

[14] Legal scholar Ian Haney-Lopez offers a more in-depth analysis of this incident along with other examples of Reagan's race-baiting. See Ian Haney-Lopez, *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 58. Marable also references the speech in Mississippi as evidence of how racism served as the "ideological glue" of Reagan's political program. See Marable, 176.
[15] See "Chronology of Events 1982," in *The State of Black America 1983*, ed. James D. Williams (New York: National Urban League, 1983), 382.
[16] See "Chronology of Events 1982," 365; and "Chronology of Events 1981," 310, 292.

rendered a negligible factor in everyday American life. By this logic, policies offering some modicum of corrective action for persistent inequality constituted bias, i.e. so-called "reverse racism."[17] The terrible irony is that this backwards reasoning succeeded in disavowing ongoing racism while buttressing a social hierarchy that still revolved entirely around the privileging of racial Whiteness.

The cumulative result was the intensification of what were already tremendous pressures for Black Americans, the gravity of which was borne out by a bevy of statistical data. As the National Urban League reported, Reagan's economic policies drove "more than half a million families into poverty" and a once growing Black middle class contracted.[18] Black unemployment reached Depression-era levels as blue-collar jobs evaporated; the signs for Black teens were even more alarming as their unemployment rate hit 41.6 percent in 1985.[19] Economic inequality along racial lines was greater than at any time since 1970. Half of all children of color remained in racially segregated schools. Inner-city neighborhoods were rendered less diverse and financially starved as upwardly mobile Blacks and Whites fled to the suburbs. By the mid-1980s, crack cocaine devastated such communities, spurring street gang violence and skyrocketing murder rates.[20] A coinciding, and perhaps equally devastating, phenomenon was the explosion of mass incarceration, particularly of young Black men, as a result of repressive law

[17] For in-depth discussions of the pernicious discourse of racial colorblindness, see Michael K. Brown et al, *Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, 4th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).
[18] See Jacob, "An Overview of Black America in 1984," iii; and John E. Jacob, "Introduction," in *The State of Black America 1983*, ed. James D. Williams (New York: National Urban League, 1983), ii-iii.
[19] See James D. McGhee, "The Black Teenager: An Endangered Species," in *The State of Black America 1982*, ed. James D. Williams (New York: National Urban League, 1982), 171-196.
[20] During this period, homicide was the fourth leading cause of death for Black males. Young Black men were especially vulnerable with murder as the leading cause of death for ages 20-29. For Black women, the chance of being murdered was one in 124 while the rate for Black men stood at one in 29. By contrast, the rates for White women and men were one in 606 and one in 186, respectively. See Marable, 190.

enforcement and draconian sentencing guidelines. As legal scholar Michelle Alexander has shown, the Reagan administration's "War on Drugs" retrenched a "racial caste system" akin to Jim Crow and exacerbated the destruction of urban Black communities.[21] As the effects of civic abandonment and legal suppression intersected with the headwinds of economic downturn, many Black communities were rendered isolated.

The expansion of these sorts of black holes within the country's social fabric was not a hidden phenomenon, as the mainstream news media offered some coverage of the widening divides between Black and White Americans. Popular news magazines *Time* and *The New Yorker* offered extensive studies of the emergence of a so-called "underclass," both of which largely centered on poverty in Black urban communities.[22] Two of the nation's leading newspapers, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, ran a series of polls revealing a considerable divide between how Black and White respondents viewed the realities of equal opportunities, a resurgence of anti-Black racism, and the future of America with Reagan at the helm.[23] In other words, the free fall of conditions was part of a public conversation. As such, these news stories are evidence of a blithe disregard for the lives of Black and poor Americans on the part of the country's political leadership. The news coverage also attests to a more nuanced form of racial antagonism, specifically in how the twinned forces of poverty and race were

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[21] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 4.
[22] See "The American Underclass," *Time*, August 29, 1977, and the three-part series by Ken Auletta entitled "The Underclass" that ran in the Nov. 16, 1978, Nov. 23, 1978, and Nov. 30, 1978 issues of *The New Yorker*.
[23] See Herbert H. Denton and Barry Sussman, "Blacks, Whites Agree Blacks Have Gained, Differ on What's Ahead," *The Washington Post*, March 24, 1981, A1; Herbert H. Denton and Barry Sussman, "'Crossover Generation' of Blacks Expresses Most Distrust of Whites," *The Washington Post*, March 25, 1981, A1; Barry Sussman and Herbert H. Denton, "Lingering Racial Stereotypes Damage Blacks," *The Washington Post*, March 26, 1981, A1; and Adam Clymer, "Blacks in U.S. Are Becoming More Pessimistic, Polls Hint," *The New York Times*, August 24, 1981, A1.

characterized and understood as personal failings rather than as symptomatic of structural inequalities. While the press looked to acknowledge a very real, ongoing disaster in Black communities, it often did so in ways that both implicitly and explicitly demonized the subjects of poverty as criminals and people with moral foibles. Young Black men were especially vulnerable to being framed as drug-addled and prone to violence. The ostensible failings of Black families, which were increasingly headed by single mothers, were laid at the feet of Black women. The abandonment and repression of Black communities were, in a sense, justified by what were too often spectacular depictions of poverty defined by street gang activity and the stereotype of women bearing children as a means to game the welfare system.

Yet, as this lived devastation expanded in ways that calcified perceptions of Blackness in negative social terms, a seemingly antithetical shift was underway in cultural spheres. During this period, a stream of high-profile instances of individual Black success proliferated in the American popular imagination. To name a handful, the 1980s saw the rise of basketball stars Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson, and the track-and-field standouts Jackie Joyner-Kersee and Florence Griffith-Joyner. *The Cosby Show* debuted in 1984 while *The Oprah Winfrey Show* gained national syndication in 1986; both would become two of American television's most celebrated programs. Comedian Eddie Murphy joined *Saturday Night Live* in 1980, quickly parlaying the exposure into a movie career. As Michael Jackson skyrocketed into a global phenomenon with *Thriller* (1982), Prince cemented his star status with a more idiosyncratic approach to pop music. Meanwhile Whitney Houston embarked on a series of record-shattering album releases. The arrival and celebration of such figures by mainstream White America highlights the

broader conflicting dynamics regarding how Black life was represented and understood at this time. As television scholar Herman Gray has confirmed, this framing of Blackness as either successful model minority or social menace helped animate and consolidate the turn to a conservative social and political order.[24]

For Marable, the advent of this duality and its resulting tensions constituted the "modern racial paradox," as the inclusion of individual Black celebrities seemed to defy the entrenchment of regressive racial attitudes among many White Americans.[25] As Marable states, some explanation lay in a tendency toward "interaction without understanding," as celebrating artistry or athleticism did not necessarily result in any recognition of how race may have shaped such expressions, let alone the cultures and lives of other Black people.[26] Such paradoxical dynamics surrounding Black life aligned with what historian Robert M. Collins has described as "an expansive new creed known as multiculturalism" that also emerged in this moment.[27] Though this doctrine sprang from an altruistic impulse to acknowledge difference writ large (race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation), Collins argues the movement fell victim to its universalist logics. Akin to how Black performers were embraced with little cognizance of Black life, in tending toward celebrating all ways of life in equivalent terms, multiculturalism often evacuated any sense of cultural specificity, and, more importantly, asymmetric needs for

[24] Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004): 16-25. Also see Nelson George, *Post-Soul Nation: The Explosive, Contradictory, Triumphant, and Tragic 1980s as Experienced by African Americans (Previously Known as Blacks and Before That Negroes)* (New York: Viking, 2004).
[25] See Marable, 182-188.
[26] Marable, 187.
[27] Robert M. Collins, 181.

social justice.[28] From a more troubling perspective, the concurrent development of these phenomena provided convenient alibis for America to avoid reckoning with a system that privileged White people while masquerading as the "normal" state of affairs.

Much of what I have described above speaks to sinking conditions that circumscribed life for many Black Americans. Though I build on existing analyses of the duality and paradox of Black representation, my work is fundamentally concerned with how the work of certain artists negotiated and contested such circumstances. They were certainly not alone in their efforts. As historian Daniel Rodgers has shown, as much as race remained a fact of social reality—inequalities and domination continued to be enforced and lived—the very languages of race also continued to be malleable. In this moment, a host of Black political leaders, intellectuals, and artists claimed and reshaped the fundamental status and terms of Blackness, often in competing ways.[29] Rodgers offers a broad view, citing the increased presence of Black talent on television and radio as evidence of fundamental shifts, or fractures, in the racial landscape of popular media. I investigate how a specific group of performers traversed the contradictions of that fluctuating minefield. My analysis shows how they presented projects that expanded those fissures, forging more mobile, flexible conceptions of Black identity and substantive multicultural equality. Yet, in some cases, the works also served to smooth over those jagged breaks, re-ensuring the familiar routines and patterns of White privilege and anti-Black racism. In their respective ways, they each recognized, if not

[28] Perhaps needless to say, my outlay of multiculturalism is a drastically condensed accounting of what is a much more complex, historically contingent phenomenon. The debates over multiculturalism—what it comprises, its intentions, its successes and failures—are numerous and ongoing.

[29] Among the many astute claims Rodgers elaborates about the shifting social and intellectual currents in the late twentieth century, he details how assertions of racial pride and efforts to generate Black cultural consciousness around memories of the appalling experiences of enslavement came into conflict with efforts to fully destabilize, or "de-essentialize," racialized identities. See the chapter "Race and Social Memory" in Rodgers, 111-143.

directly experienced, the ongoing ravaging of so many Black lives and communities wrought by political dereliction, as well as the accompanying decline in racial cooperation. Ultimately, I parse how science fiction sounds and images were so vital and efficacious to transmitting the tensions endemic to those developments.

A return to Earth

> When I began to do a little public speaking, one of the questions I heard most often was, "What good is science fiction to Black people?" … What good is science fiction's thinking about the present, the future and the past? What good is its tendency to warn or to consider alternative ways of thinking and doing? What good is its examination of the possible effects of science and technology, of social organization and political direction? At its best, science fiction stimulates imagination and creativity. It gets reader and writer off the beaten track, off the narrow, narrow footpath of what "everyone" is saying, doing, thinking—whoever "everyone" happens to be this year. And what good is all this to Black people?[30]
>
> — Octavia E. Butler, "Birth of a Writer"

Space exploration and its associated science and technologies have long figured in the American cultural imagination. Though national efforts at this historical juncture did not enjoy the same traction as the Space Race in the 1950s or the Apollo 11 moon landing mission in 1969, a series of events still stirred a mix of fascination and apprehension.[31] In the lead-up to the 1980s, the Viking and Voyager probes beamed back the first images of Jupiter, Saturn and Mars from deep space. The broadcast of *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage* (Adrian Malone, 1980) narrated by astronomer Carl Sagan would become one of the most widely watched series in television history. In 1983, President Reagan proposed the Strategic Defensive Initiative, a space-based shield against possible nuclear strikes that was quickly dubbed "Star Wars." And NASA's Space Shuttle

[30] Octavia E. Butler, "Birth of a Writer," *Essence*, May 1989, 134.
[31] For analysis of the varied regard in Black communities for America's post-war fixations on space, see Lynn Spigel, "Outer Space and Inner Cities: African American Responses to NASA" in *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 141-182.

program provided bookends of sorts to this period between the first operational flight to carry astronauts in 1982 and the disaster in 1986 that killed all seven crew members on the Challenger. In some cases, artists took inspiration from such scientific inquiry. For example, Hancock's memoir is peppered with references to his fascination with space travel, including an anecdote about his awe at witnessing a shuttle landing in 1981.[32]

Actual astrophysics notwithstanding, fictional iterations of interstellar travel and imagined technologies also attested to broad interest in all things space-related in the late twentieth century. The popular culture of the preceding and immediate moments was rife with music and films that ventured along astral territory, often in concert with uncanny electronic sounds. Perhaps most famously, David Bowie exploited a series of alien fixations to confront the boundaries of fame, religion, and gender and sexual identity.[33] A slew of science fiction movies—*Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg, 1977), *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), *Escape from New York* (John Carpenter, 1981), *Tron* (Steven Lisberger, 1982), to name a few—stimulated widespread fascination with the unknown, the futuristic, and the dystopian. Most notably, George Lucas's *Star Wars* franchise, which commenced in 1977, was an inescapable cultural force. Though the works I study riffed on specific ideas from such productions, the artists did not appear to regard themselves as diversifying or laying claims to science fiction (although they implicitly did).[34] Rather, generic themes and concepts comprised expressive heuristics to

[32] See Herbie Hancock, *Possibilities*, with Lisa Dickey (New York: Viking, 2014), 227-229.
[33] Bowie's space explorations spanned music and film. In addition to his song "Space Oddity" (1969) and the concept album *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972), he portrayed an alien being in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (Nicolas Roeg, 1976), a film adaptation of a science fiction novel of the same title by Walter Tevis from 1963.
[34] André M. Carrington identifies how a different group of productions from across media can be understood to have more specifically intervened in the sense of Whiteness that has historically dominated the science fiction genre. See André M. Carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

reimagine the prevailing social order and engage the widest audiences possible. Science fiction fulfilled aspirations that were universal, in all senses of the term.

Most pertinent to this discussion though is a rich continuum of Black creative expressions from across media forms that has long experimented with themes and concepts from science fiction. This loose rubric, which was coined in the early 1990s as Afrofuturism, looks to identify a creative sensibility found across music, film, visual art, comics, and literature. A core trio of musicians from earlier eras—astral jazz bandleader Sun Ra, funkateer George Clinton, and dub reggae prophet Lee "Scratch" Perry—have come to be thought of as initiating this tradition starting in the mid-1950s.[35] In the more immediate lead-up to the 1980s, diversionary space travel, cosmic locales and funky robots were recurring motifs for a wave of Black performers working in popular dance genres, particularly R&B and disco.[36] The artists I examine continued to play with these themes, but their work also turned from a general sense of exuberant escapism. Many of the sonic and visual details of their experiments bristle with militaristic edges and display preoccupations with physical conflict, if not outright warfare. One could read this shift as manifesting concerns about the ever-present threat of nuclear destruction, or, from the angle of popular culture, as creative aftereffects of the *Star Wars* trilogy. Instead, I consider how these tensions refract their social and historical context of battles over how

[35] Music writer John Corbett parses how these artists shared similar celestial iconography across different historical moments. See John Corbett, "Brothers From Another Planet: The Space Madness of Lee 'Scratch' Perry, Sun Ra, and George Clinton" in *Extended Play: Sounding Off from John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 7-24. For a more recent consideration of Ra's importance to Afrofuturist discourse, see Paul Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World: Sun Ra and the Birth of Afrofuturism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016).

[36] Notable examples of this can be heard and seen with 21st Century, *Ahead of Our Time* (1975); Captain Sky, *Pop Goes Captain* (1979); The Fifth Dimension, *Star Dancing* (1978); Floaters, *Into the Future* (1979); Kool & the Gang, *Love & Understanding* (1976); Midnight Star, *Standing Together* (1981); The Originals, *Another Time Another Place* (1978); Slave, *The Concept* (1978); Spinners, *From Here to Eternally* (1979); Stargard, *What You Waitin' For* (1978); and Switch, *Reaching for Tomorrow* (1980).

race, particularly Blackness, was understood and lived on the ground in America. As much as their works seemed to travel afar, they inevitably returned to Earth.

My thinking on these affairs builds on a growing body of Afrofuturist thought, the central theorists of which come from a host of backgrounds, including critical race theory, popular music journalism, media studies, Black studies, art history, and English literature. Their theorizations are often developed around the identification and analysis of creative works by an ever-expanding cohort of practitioners—musicians, visual artists, authors and filmmakers—working across media.[37] Since the term was conceived, Afrofuturism, whether posited as a theoretical program, artistic genre, aesthetic style, or literary movement, has resisted a concrete conceptualization. Further, the Afrofuturist designation is not unanimously accepted, in part given how it is more often assigned rather artists self-identifying with the mantle.[38] Some of the contestation also stems from

[37] The 1980s saw a flourishing of Afrofuturist experiments. In the wake of Bambaataa's "Planet Rock," the stable of electro artists quickly expanded to include Captain Rock, Rich Cason and the Galactic Orchestra, Jonzun Crew, Newcleus, Planet Patrol, Strafe, among a host of other smaller and one-off projects. The independent films *Born in Flames* (Lizzie Borden, 1983) and *The Brother from Another Planet* (John Sayles, 1984) saw releases. In literature, a core quartet of writers that included Steven Barnes, Octavia E. Butler, Samuel R. Delaney, and Charles Saunders continued working in the science fiction and fantasy genres. In the visual arts, a wide swath of street art demonstrated a sci-fi influence, in particular the sprawling letter battles waged by RAMM:ΣLL:ZΣΣ.

[38] In the contemporary moment, a host of variants and challenges to Afrofuturism have been theorized. These include Rasheedah Phillips's "Black Quantum Futurism," a theory and practice that enables thinkers to envision a desired future and fold it into one's present reality. Artist Martine Syms's manifesto on "Mundane Afrofuturism" calls for recalibrating notions of futurity from "magic interstellar travel" to more realistic, everyday concerns. Historian Robin D.G. Kelley had advanced the concept of a similar fantastic aesthetic but with a divergent art historical lineage called "Afro-Surrealism." Theorist Alexander Weheliye developed "Sonic Afro-Modernity," which looks to recalibrate Western philosophical thought around Black musical expression. The hip-hop producer Ras G resists the Afrofuturist mantle altogether, saying his music should be thought of as "Ancient Timelessness." On the other hand, writer Ytasha Womack, a self-described Afrofuturist, has offered a first-person expansion of the scope of performers who might be included under the term. See Rasheedah Phillips, "Constructing a Theory and Practice of Black Quantum Futurism Part One," in *Black Quantum Future: Theory and Practice*, ed. Rasheedah Phillips (Philadelphia: The Afrofuturist Affair/House of Sciences Books, 2015), 11-30; Martin Syms, "The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto," *Rhizome* (blog), Dec. 17, 2003, http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/dec/17/mundane-afrofuturist-manifesto/; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 157-194; Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Ras G, presentation, 2015 ICIT Black Urban Music Conference, University of

the term's origins, which entailed a White cultural critic, Mark Dery, naming what he saw as a Black expressive tradition.[39] For my work, I use a loosely synonymous name, Black science fiction, as it is less freighted and gestures toward a longstanding generic continuum Black artists have creatively adapted.[40] I am less concerned with the politics of Afrofuturism itself, i.e. reinforcing the concept or affirming particular artists as Afrofuturists, as I am interested in the multifaceted works and practices of these artists, specifically as generative lenses into the dynamics of a historical moment. As I show, their contents and forms help us bear witness to the lived experiences of the early 1980s and to better understand how its pressures were navigated and challenged.

Still, existing Afrofuturist theory offers a set of provocations that are crucial to the ways I begin to hear and see the works in my inquiry. These include how Afrofuturism often serves to disrupt normative conceptions of time and address the ongoing traumas of racial slavery—all through the (mis)use of electronic technologies. Though Dery introduces these ideas in his initial proposal of an Afrofuturist aesthetic, subsequent theorists have more fully articulated and advanced their radical potentials. As the British theorist Kodwo Eshun has argued, the "futurism" in the term itself constitutes a kind of stealth device, a conceptual technology that enables both artists and audiences alike to, in a way, time travel. Eshun's theory builds off a claim by Samuel R. Delaney, the renowned writer who is often thought of as another foundational figure in the Afrofuturist

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California, Irvine, Feb. 27-28, 2015; and Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013).

[39] See Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.

[40] Further, the term predates Dery's coining of Afrofuturism by at least a year. A lesser known article by British music journalist Mark Sinker refers to Black Science Fiction in offering a preliminary exploration of the possible relationships between Sun Ra, hip-hop and the cyberpunk writing of the 1990s. See Mark Sinker, "Loving the Alien," *The Wire*, February 1992, 30-33.

tradition. As he once suggested, "Science fiction is not 'about the future.'"[41] Instead, notions of the future are what enable writers "to indulge in a significant distortion of the present that sets up a rich and complex dialogue with the reader's here and now."[42] For Eshun, this statement opens portals between imagined "futures" and lived circumstances that inhibit such possibilities from manifesting. As he argues, "It becomes apparent that science fiction was never concerned with the future, but rather with engineering feedback between its preferred future and its becoming present."[43] The true, more cunning, purpose of Black science fiction might be in how it seeks to interrupt, however temporarily, the reigning conditions of possibility that circumscribe liberation. Unsettling the routine maintenance of cultural hierarchies that privilege racial Whiteness generates spaces for new, preferred social organization and ways of being.

This conception of Afrofuturism effectively functions as a telescoping lens across time, one that comprises an archaeological perspective on the ongoing complexities of Black life as much as it encourages futuristic thinking. The aesthetic sustains a much longer view of how the past continues to shape both the contemporary moment and what might be to come. As sociologist Alondra Nelson has noted, this concerted retention of history positions Afrofuturism as a foil for the "neocriticism" of late twentieth-century cyberculture that fantasizes about deracinated, computer-controlled utopias; predictions that "smack of old racial ideologies" in their refusal to confront the residual legacies of

[41] Samuel R. Delaney, "*Dichtung Und* Science Fiction," in *Starboard Wine: More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction* (Pleasantville, NY: Dragon Press, 1984), 176.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Kodwo Eshun "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 290. For further thoughts along these lines, see Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998) and John Akomfrah's essay film *The Last Angel of History* (1996), both of which look to theorize and propel Afrofuturist thought in action.

White supremacy.[44] She argues that as a practice, Afrofuturism relies on—and demands an acknowledgement of—histories of oppression, particularly those extending from racial slavery. In offering competing, affirmative visions of identity and belonging that are historically grounded, Black science fiction might act as a bulwark against a dominant range of colorblind fantasies and willful White amnesia that effaces the experiences, and often the very existence, of Black subjects. The artists of my study do not look to intervene in cyberculture (they largely precede this phenomenon), but they each present alternative ideas about the potential relationships between racial Blackness and various modes of audiovisual technologies. In doing so, they put versions of the historical operation Nelson outlines into action, both in direct and indirect ways. That being said, at times the results go awry, as with how Jackson's *Captain EO* project reinvigorates anti-Black violence associated with slavery in its simulation of the future.

While Afrofuturist theory provides a foundation for my inquiry, I diverge in two primary ways. The creative works I observe certainly bear hallmarks of an Afrofuturist approach, yet the artists are also unique in the scopes of their exposure and social missions. They enjoyed levels of popularity and exposure to much broader, in some cases entirely mainstream, audiences that few Afrofuturist projects had ever attained. Further, they were each outspoken about their universal aspirations, as they saw their messages of unity and discovery as speaking to diverse publics rather than niche demographics. This is not to say that the audience for Afrofuturism has been limited to Black people, as such

[44] Alondra Nelson, "Introduction Future Texts," *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002): 1, 9. In effect, Nelson takes up a question that Dery never answers in his original conception of Afrofuturism: "Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?" For Nelson, the fundamental question is not a matter of ability, i.e. of course the community can imagine possible futures, but rather, *how* are those possible futures imagined? What sort of work do those imaginations perform? See Dery, 180.

work has always appealed to varied fans and broached conflicts that fundamentally address diverse subjects. Instead, my point is that in the 1980s, these three artists pursued deliberately wide-ranging messages that gained traction in commercial media venues with vast national audiences, including MTV and Disney theme parks. This points to my second divergence in that while existing Afrofuturist literature tends toward theoretical programs, I am more concerned with how Black science fiction expressions intervened at a particular time. I look to produce a kind of history of *how* these futuristic themes and techniques unfolded and *to what ends* those projects worked, specifically against the demands and contradictions of their historical moment.

Ensemble as theory, ensemble as method

In addition to thinking with Afrofuturist theory about the cosmic elements of my inquiry, I build on a lineage of critical thought that more generally engages the expressive potentials of Black music. This tradition, which extends through Frederick Douglass's memoir *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and W. E. B. DuBois's canonical *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), has long asserted a profound mixing of beauty, tragedy and pleasure as defining such sounds. That sensibility also runs through Amiri Baraka's 1966 essay, "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)," in which he theorizes the development of a musical mode that synthesizes existing Black musical genres with "all the resources, all the rhythms, all the yells and cries, all that information about the world."[45] Theorist and poet Fred Moten has plumbed similar territory, offering a working concept of "ensemble" that constitutes both a theorization of the relational complexities that give rise to Black creative expression and a method for attending to the

[45] LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)," *Black Music* (New York: Apollo Editions, 1970), 211.

densities of their meanings. Throughout *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003), Moten gestures toward a framework for ensemble that I further develop and extend as an overarching analytic for my work.[46]

At its core, Moten's theory resembles the basic definitions of the ensemble term, namely a group of performers and/or items observed as a whole rather than separately. His concept thickens this description, as he recasts ensemble as a "field of convergence," a compound of subjects, conditions, and forces simultaneously at play.[47] This field encompasses both the assembly of musicians engaged in a performance and the range of personal experiences, memories and relationships that each performer brings to the stage or recording studio.[48] Additionally, the group members are always already subject to a broad range of embodied circumstances, conditions that are lived whether one is aware of them. Such forces, which range from the racial to the cultural to the social to the political, comprise another layer of ensemble. A performance fuses all these elements, from the artists themselves to the entirety of the forces surrounding them. As Moten theorizes, such creative acts are tantamount to a collaborative transformation that produces an expressive totality. The "field of convergence" constitutes—and generates—rich, multifaceted meanings that cannot be reduced to their constituent parts.

This model casts Black musical performance in an expansive light, implicitly suggesting that the interrelations and associations of its meanings are manifold. As such,

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[46] While Moten's central focus is on elaborating a multifaceted concept of what he calls "the break," he relies on a host of subsidiary theories, including ensemble. Bridget R. Cooks and I have written elsewhere on how manifestations of the break in certain works of jazz transmit the contradictions of Black life and death in the early 1960s. See Bridget R. Cooks and Graham Eng-Wilmot, "Sound of the Break: Jazz and the Failures of Emancipation," *American Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (June 2016): 315-340.

[47] Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 255 note 1.

[48] Moten describes singular artists (and himself) in terms of ensemble. In a sense, any artist is always already engaged in a dialogue with other work, actors, social and/or political circumstances. In short, he might argue the creative process, even when pursued by a lone artist, is inherently an ensemble mode.

ensemble presents a practical challenge for interpretation: How might one assess let alone fathom that expressive totality? How can the various layers be sifted, traced and then understood in their collective fullness? In Moten's view, analysis begins with observing musical structure and utterance such as lyrics, harmonies, rhythms and melodies, but it is the multisensorial dimensions of a given performance that convey the resonant subtleties of ensemble. The dynamics of convergence, the ways subjects, ideas and forms coalesce (or not), transmit complete meaning. Moten specifically identifies qualities such as "tone and rhythm" or "phrasing or bent words" as essential expressive vehicles.[49] For example, in generating a tactile texture, a rhythm might thereby evoke the very field of ensemble, a sonic fabric in which multiple threads of knowledge and experience weave together.[50] Ensemble encourages us to attune our listening to these more nuanced details of musical performance. As a method, it requires the consideration of *what* a particular performance might appear to say, but more importantly, *how* it is stated.

Ensemble is not only a matter of attending to musical dynamics. It also confronts a fundamental question of how the listener, or researcher as is the case, parses their meanings. The crux is that music is an intrinsically different mode of communication than written or spoken discourse. As Moten describes it, music transmits "on frequencies outside and beneath the range of reading."[51] Moving between the two—analyzing music via language—is fraught with the potential for a reduction in fidelity. He recognizes this, asking: "What happens in the transcription of performance, event, ritual? What happens,

[49] Moten, 52.
[50] Moten elaborates on multisensoriality in terms of synesthesia, as the aural qualities of some musical performances can compel listening that is, in effect, seeing. See his discussion of a passage in Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* in which the protagonist "listens" to Louis Armstrong. See Moten, 52, 67.
[51] Moten cites saxophonist Charles Lloyd, who replies, "Words don't go there," when asked to discuss the meanings of his music. See Moten, 41.

which is to say what is lost, in the recording?"[52] In this case, "the recording" being the work of analyzing and writing about a musical event. Moten's response is to deviate from attempting some pure, lossless mode of translation. Rather, he encourages engagement that observes *and responds* to musical performance. The researcher listens but also, in a sense, plays accompaniment. The appropriate means of tapping into those frequencies that are "outside and beneath" is to, in effect, perform as one writes, to become a de facto member of the ensemble.[53] This approach opens interpretive relays between performers, their music, their biographies, historical circumstances, criticism and surrounding critical thought. These efforts do not seek an objective truth about the music or its authorial intent. Instead, the aim is to interpret music across and within a much larger backdrop—an ensemble—of circumstances, conditions, ideas and temporalities. The writing that ensues, which Moten calls "poetry," is a further level of collaborative synthesis, another transformative cycle of the expressive totality that is ensemble.[54]

Though I do not claim to achieve poetry with this project, the ensemble mode accurately describes the way I listen to, look at, and synthesize a host of musical and audiovisual events. From another perspective, mobilizing the concept follows the lead of the artists, as they pursued ensemble modes in fundamental ways, three of which have influenced the ways I analyze and understand their work. At a base level, Bambaataa,

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[52] Moten, 43.

[53] As Moten says, he is "preparing myself to play with" the musicians whose works are the subjects of his analysis. This is to say that he understands himself as engaged in a collaborative dialogue or improvisation with the likes of jazz greats such as Cecil Taylor, Duke Ellington and Abbey Lincoln. See Moten, 45.

[54] Moten describes his work as, "A poetry, then, that is of the music; a poetry that would articulate the music's construction." Another way of saying this is that perhaps we might consider theoretical and historical inquiry as operating with their own sorts of poetic sensibilities. To clarify further, Moten offers no pretense about working from an impartial position. Instead, he is invested in interpretations that enter a continuum of Black creative expression, specifically that which articulates the tensions between resistance and suffering, desire and loss, violence and resilience. Such an approach is inherently self-reflexive. Personally speaking, it has offered reminders about the opportunity for creativity in academic inquiry and the responsibility to one's subjects that comes with doing such work. See Moten, 44.

Hancock and Jackson were often thought of as singular artists, but their creative practices were deeply collaborative, whether it was working with producers, other musicians and groups, visual artists, or film crews. Second, the electronic edge that characterized their work had much to do with technologies of the time, particularly newly commercially available synthesizers and computer-based samplers.[55] The sounds of these devices arrived laden with science fiction connotations, which were vital to the audiovisual projects of synthesizing new worlds and creative mobility.[56] Further, such instruments enabled those futuristic dimensions to be infused with expressions from the past, at times in ways that offered latent affirmations of Black musical statements and styles. Finally, their music was accompanied by a range of visual components. These presentations of audio and visuals were designed in part for marketing purposes, for example, artwork on sleeves for vinyl singles and music videos as promotional media.[57] They also had the effect of generating multifaceted fields of meaning around each work. As a result, my analysis via ensemble attends to the relationships and tensions between the complicated, often contradictory messages that resonate between the sounds and images.[58]

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[55] In reflecting on technologies of the 1980s, *Musician* noted 1981 to 1983 was dominated by "affordable" synthesizers and drum machines. This claim was backed up by reports of an increase in sales of electronics in this era. See Jock Baird, "The Decade in Tech," *Musician*, November 1, 1989, 46; and John Rockwell, "Electronics Is Challenging Traditions in Music," *The New York Times*, August 7, 1986, C19.

[56] The association can be traced to Louis and Bebe Barron's soundtrack for *Forbidden Planet* (Fred M. Wilcox, 1956), which was the first movie to feature a score that was entirely electronic. See Mark Brend, "The Privilege of Ignoring Conventions: Exploring the *Forbidden Planet*," in *The Sound of Tomorrow: How Electronic Music Was Smuggled into the Mainstream* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 50-71; and Timothy D. Taylor, *Strange Sounds: Music, Technology & Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 93-94.

[57] In 1984, *Billboard* noted "higher profile sleeve design" among the methods labels were using to court a growing audience for Black dance music. See Steven Harvey, "Major Labels Emulated Indies," *Billboard*, August 11, 1984, D-4. Media scholar Andrew Goodwin has detailed the emergence of the music video as a promotional method. See Andrew Goodwin, *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 24-30.

[58] This linked analysis of audio and visual material certainly echoes how Moten encourages awareness of the multisensorial aspects of a work. The work of music scholar Josh Kun is also instructive in how its builds an audiovisual mode of analysis around "audio color," a phrase from saxophonist Rahsaan Roland Kirk. As Kun argues, this phrase speaks to how music and its meanings are always already intertwined with its "look," i.e. visual ideas ascribed to its producers. The invocation of color also suggests that a spectrum

The flight path

In the opening chapter, I develop a set of claims around what I call the "Soulsonic Aesthetic," a set of principles that guided Afrika Bambaataa's creative persona and work, including music, costumes and album covers. Further, the audiovisual philosophy undergirded his accompanying political projects, which centered on affirming the lives of Black and Latino youth in New York and forging multicultural alliances across the globe. The aesthetic revolved around the presentation of Black super heroes, interplanetary travelers who were as futuristic as they were anachronistic; techno-fied masquerades of Native American warriors, African tribesmen and Mad Max-style street prophets, all of which drew heavily on the influence of the pioneering funk group, Parliament-Funkadelic. I contend that these characters, as cartoonish or boyish as they appeared, intervened in the prevailing representational trope of young Black men as social menaces. In conjunction with the syncretic visual and performance style, Bambaataa, along with the "Future Beat Alliance," i.e. the in-house production team at Tommy Boy Records, crafted a musical ethos that was omnivorous in its approach to sampling. Just as important was their experimentation with programmable drum machines, which inhabited a rhythmic logic of open, endless beats. As I argue, such aesthetic priorities propelled a broader social vision of multicultural coalition that in the face of efforts to deny racial identities, sought to acknowledge and harness their transformative potential.

It is important to acknowledge that in our contemporary moment, Bambaataa faces allegations that complicate our understandings of his leadership and stature as one of the godfathers of hip-hop culture. In April 2016, former members of his organization

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of ideological notions about race is also embedded in and transmitted via music. See Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 118.

accused him of sexual abuse that occurred in the 1980s. As of now he faces no criminal charges and he has denied the allegations. Given the current statute of limitations on such cases in New York state, it is unclear whether criminal charges or civil penalties could ever be brought against him. In the aftermath of the accusations, Bambaataa was excommunicated from the Universal Zulu Nation. The outcome of this situation remains to be seen.[59] It would be convenient to claim that we might separate personal actions from artists and their creative works. Such a distinction would be quite difficult and irresponsible to make in Bambaataa's case given the fundamental intertwining of his art and community organization. Suffice to say, news of such events is disturbing, especially when one considers the prospects that he may have grossly abused his musical and community standing, both of which were so crucial to animating a culture and genre.

In chapter two, I consider Herbie Hancock's successful turn to electro-style hip-hop that initiates in 1983 with a single entitled "Rockit" and the subsequent *Future Shock* album. While the title and cover of the album conjured the horizons of new digital worlds, the album simultaneously riffed on the analog, terrestrial past. The title track covered a minor hit that funk performer Curtis Mayfield released ten years prior. The lyrics suture a warning about environmental calamity to a lament about how White America revels in Black music and performance while remaining willfully ignorant of their historical circumstances. I consider Hancock's electronic updating of that critique in conjunction with details of its famed visual and audiovisual accompaniments, including the music video and televised performance of "Rockit" at the 1984 Grammy Awards, and

[59] For an extensive journalistic account of how this sequence of events developed in 2016, see Dave Wedge, "Afrika Bambaataa Allegedly Molested Young Men For Decades. Why Are the Accusations Only Coming out Now?" *Vice*, October 2016, https://thump.vice.com/en_us/article/afrika-bambaataa-sexual-abuse-zulu-nation-ron-savage-hassan-campbell.

the computer-generated image that fronted the album. I show how the futuristic associations of Hancock's work were calibrated to evade the racial restrictions of American popular media of the time. Yet, despite their evocations of mobility and creative discovery, they continued to run up against persistent anti-Black tendencies.

The third chapter concerns a 1986 collaboration between Michael Jackson and a host of Hollywood and Disney notables—George Lucas, Francis Ford Coppola, a crack team of "Imagineers"—on a seventeen-minute attraction that was immediately reminiscent of *Star Wars*. The experience was trumpeted as an advance in "4-D" entertainment given its combination of 3-D technology and in-theater special effects. This "innovation" was underwritten by a shocking reliance on interactive depictions of anti-Black violence that resemble the conditions of chattel slavery. In the centerpiece dance sequences, Jackson is prodded with spears and subjected to an attack by whip-wielding overseer figures. Such spectacles are rendered even more peculiar given that the film was ostensibly about the future and released in 1986. I interpret how the formal mechanics of *Captain EO* exploits racial violence to visualize a transformed utopian society that hardly deviates from the racist conditions of lived reality in the late twentieth century.

I conclude with some brief thoughts on the sociopolitical propositions of fantasy in the early 1980s. My discussion is not framed in terms of the genre, which is closely linked to science fiction. Rather I consider fantasy as an active imaginative process with real, material effects. As the late twentieth century neared its close, America was subject to a web of competing fantasies that undeniably shaped the country's future. Some of these designs underwrote the retrenchment of familiar patterns of social hierarchy, while others sustained a journey toward the near impossibility of racial liberation.

Chapter 1
To Be Boundless and Yet Bound: The Soulsonic Aesthetic of Afrika Bambaataa

One of the opening vignettes in the BBC's 1984 documentary, *Beat This! A Hip-Hop History*, is set in a dark planetarium.[1] As the star ball projector rotates into position, the narration intones about imaginative leaps humans have made when gazing at the night sky. The audience, a group of young boys, stares upward, absorbed in the twinkling lights, ethereal soundtrack and stories of unidentified flying objects. What appears to be a serene setting unravels as the calm digital hum is overpowered by synthesized phaser blasts, noises that may or may not be part of the show. Unbeknownst to the youth, an imposing figure decked out in a double-horn helm and spiked vinyl overcoat appears at the rear of the theater. The lumbering giant speaks awkwardly into an electronic microphone, rendering his vocals cyborg, a hybrid of human and flattened robotic affect. "I am the funk overlord," he drones. "I have come to take control of your mind. Who controls the present, controls the past. Who controls the past controls the future. Funk!" The effect is as peculiar as it is ominous, a goofiness betraying benevolence even as the speech threatens mental takeover. At first the boys respond with blank stares. As the scene concludes, they appear in silhouette, transformed into human robots performing popping dance moves as they follow the lead of the futuristic warrior.[2] The staged television sequence highlights the dynamics of the Pied Piper mission Afrika Bambaataa had pursued in the southeast Bronx since the mid-1970s. Changing the conditions of

[1] *Beat This! A Hip-Hop History*, directed by Dick Fontaine (1984; British Broadcasting Company). Fontaine later used footage from the *Beat This!* shoots in music videos for Bambaataa's songs for the Tommy Boy record label.

[2] There is a potentially darker undertone to this sequence in light of recent news about Bambaataa. In 2016, former members of his organization accused him of sexual abuse. Currently, he faces no formal charges and he has denied the allegations. See my longer discussion of this situation in the introduction.

possibility for young people of color in New York—and then across the globe—might be accomplished via electrified disruptions of linear time along with a recalibration of young minds to the wavelength of funk. The mechanics of this proposition seamlessly blur the lines between social reality and the fantastical stuff of science fiction.

The political proposal of this scene relies on the sonic and visual effect of Bambaataa's persona, the performance of which hews to a larger creative philosophy. This approach, which I call the "Soulsonic Aesthetic," was an amalgam of bizarre militaristic costumery, supercharged heroes envisioned in the vein of Marvel Comics, and a host of statements about interplanetary excursions—all of which was set to the percussive sounds of electronic funk. Bambaataa unfurled these ideas across multiple media forms, embedding them in his music and video productions, live performances, record sleeves, and written texts. I contend that this creative sensibility did not comprise a solely audiovisual aesthetic but also proposed a collaborative cosmology invested in propelling racial liberation and ultimately unity in the near future if not the present. The synthesizing logic that guides the Soulsonic Aesthetic—the incorporation of disparate influences, ideas and materials—was intertwined with its political project of bringing diverse peoples together. In other words, the Soulsonic Aesthetic was oriented toward the possibilities of a different way of life, one that was just, equitable, and in which racialized subjects with long histories of oppression exerted more command over their lives and destines. In execution, the utopian sensibility of Bambaataa's work was shadowed by a bleak, increasingly cataclysmic, worldview. This tension was in part a rhetorical vehicle to compel social change. I argue that it was also symptomatic of how the impossibilities of that very project were experienced by Black subjects in the 1980s.

Though Bambaataa has been consistently outspoken about his aspirations during his storied career, the preceding claims may not be self-evident. Ass-shaking beats, scat lyrics, comic book illustrations, and bizarre outfits would all seem to have little to do with freedom and unity. This chapter looks to understand *how* the Soulsonic Aesthetic manifests through an interlocking set of sonic and visual modes. Traversing this field of expression is a daunting task given the quantity of his output during the period from 1982 to 1986, as well as how his practice thrives on incorporating seemingly incongruent influences and ideas.[3] After observing his primary creative influences, I anchor my analysis around three landmark musical statements that Bambaataa released with his primary group, the Soulsonic Force, through the Tommy Boy record label: "Planet Rock" (1982), "Looking for the Perfect Beat" (1983) and "Renegades of Funk" (1983). Each of these songs proved foundational in articulating the core concerns and facets of his creative approach. The sonic impact of his aesthetic was often accompanied by fantastic visuals. Following a discussion of record sleeve art, my work culminates with a discussion of the spectacle of his costumes, which he and the Soulsonic Force, wore during live appearances. Much of the resonance across these sonic and visual modes can be attributed to shared personnel behind the scenes, both in terms of the music studio and art direction. My work is not a pure production history. Instead, my primary concern is for Bambaataa's "messages" and how they are rendered across the various modes, specifically the ways in which their content and form dovetail.

[3] During this four-year span, Bambaataa's groups released more than 12 singles and three albums along with a tireless domestic and international touring schedule. He also collaborated with artists such as the original godfather of funk, James Brown; punk provocateur John Lydon, formerly Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols; and a host of music legends on Steven Van Zandt's anti-apartheid protest song, "Sun City" (1985).

From the start, Bambaataa created a network of groups—Soulsonic Force, Cosmic Force, Shango, to name a few—that embodied a collaborative aural energy. This collective modeled a spirit that aligns with the dynamics of what critical theorist Fred Moten calls ensemble. Moten's conceptualization is twofold, as ensemble constitutes a mode of performance and analysis in which one engages others as if sharing in a larger collaborative enterprise. The sort of collaboration that undergirds Moten's concept of ensemble resonates with the practices, both musical and everyday, that Bambaataa has long espoused. Where ensemble for Moten offers an interpretive model for assessing the collaborative aesthetics of Black creative expression, ensemble for Bambaataa constitutes a lived ideal, a proposal for a different way of life. The idea that ensemble could—and should—be fostered in the southeast Bronx sustained his earliest music and community endeavors. The imperative for cross-racial cooperation sits at the core of the Soulsonic Aesthetic, as Bambaataa designed his music to bring people of all races, ethnicities, nations under a banner of "peace, unity and having fun."[4] He imagined the emergence of a truly "universal people," subjects who thought of themselves in both human and intergalactic terms as peaceful members of a much larger community of beings.[5] This vision was as much the projection of a science fiction future as it was concerned with the realities of the late 20th century. As the fracturing of America's political and social climate intensified in the 1980s, Bambaataa offered a cosmic program of everyday, lived unity in which differences could be embraced rather than threatened or erased.

As an analytic, Moten's work is crucial for tracking the host of ways in which Bambaataa's pursuit of solidarity guided multiple projects and modes. As Bambaataa

[4] See Afrika Bambaataa and James Brown, "Unity," Tommy Boy TB-847, 1984, 33 1/3 rpm single.
[5] Afrika Bambaataa and Soulsonic Force, "Looking for the Perfect Beat," Tommy Boy TB-831, 1983, 33 1/3 rpm single.

suggested in 1983: "Our rap is more symbolic … you have somebody to translate the Holy Bible or the Koran and the same thing is gonna be happening with Soul Sonic Force words. You need people to translate what we're saying."[6] Ensemble compels a consideration of how Bambaataa's songs and their accompanying visuals worked together. Further, the concept provides a framework to observe the dynamics of that spectacle, pinpointing its expressive qualities and elaborating its messages. This approach goes past the immediate surfaces of costumes, lyrics, etc., to attend to the range of ideas that guided Bambaataa's creative efforts. If his music serves as the site of analysis, a full consideration of that "field of convergence" yields new understandings of the cultural conditions that he worked within—and how he responded to them.

In particular, his provocative mergers of the cosmic and the quotidian can be understood as very much in dialogue with an ongoing range of structural violence meted out against racialized subjects in his home of the southeast Bronx, New York. His work looked to intervene in both the conditions of Black and Latino life in this territory, but also the ways in which those communities were represented and understood. By the 1970s, the Bronx had come to be seen by many Americans in nightmarish terms as a kind of incomprehensible black hole, an empty "jungle" defined by property damage and gang warfare among young Black and Latino teenagers.[7] Though this image rang with a note of reality, it elided any acknowledgement of how civic structures at all levels had fostered those very conditions. The systematic dismantling and subsequent abandonment of what

[6] David Dorrell, "Soul Sonic War," *New Musical Express*, February 26, 1983, 8.
[7] In 1979, Luis Cancel, the executive director of The Bronx Museum of the Arts, argued that the American news media unfairly framed his hometown as "a perilous 'no man's land'." He writes: "I knew that this community was not getting a fair shake from the government, the press or its fellow citizens. It had become a side show, a backdrop for symbolic political initiatives. The reality of abandonment, squalor and devastation had become so intense and painful for the national psyche it transcended into the surreal." See Robert Jensen, *Devastation/Resurrection: The South Bronx* (Bronx: The Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1979), 9.

had once been thriving, integrated neighborhoods of working class Jews and Blacks actually began in 1945 with the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway, a seven-mile long interstate that rammed through the heavily populated borough. In his biography of Robert Moses, the city planner who originated the project, Robert A. Caro describes the freeway as "a trench gouged across a city" that forced the demolition of countless affordable residences and disrupted the lives of hundreds of thousands of residents.[8] The undertaking required a coordinated effort among federal, state and city entities, the sum of which blithely disregarded the people of the affected communities.[9] In 1974, Caro framed the transformation in terms of a war zone, writing how parts of the Bronx "while the expressway was being built, had had the look of blitzkrieged London; now it looked as London might have looked if, after the bombs, troops had fought their way through it from house to house."[10] Caro goes on to pronounce a sense of shock that thousands of people—"the poorest of the poor"—continued to make homes within such conditions.[11]

Throughout his career, Bambaataa has expressed frustration at how the prevailing images of devastation and violence distorted the persistence of Bronx residents.[12] Such scenes offer a partial view that erased those communities—or vilified them as stricken by poverty, drugs and gangs. His work looked to counter those images with distortions of his

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[8] Robert A. Caro, *The Powerbroker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 839.

[9] Caro attributes this bureaucratic bulldozing to Moses, cataloging how he personally rammed the details of the project through administrative hurdles. Caro likens Moses' actions to that of a totalitarian regime in his disregard for the protocols of democratic governance designed to safeguard citizens. See Caro, 845-849.

[10] Caro, 893.

[11] Ibid.

[12] In 1983, Bambaataa argued: "When people think of the ghetto, they think of burnt out buildings, dirty streets and desperate people. You know, that's such a joke. Down in my area there's a few bad places, but there's good ones too … I could show you places where white people are hanging out with black and together they're making all kinds of art. … It just ain't all gangs and vigilantes." See Ian Pye, "Zulu Dawn," *Melody Maker*, June 11, 1983, 9. He has been consistent about on this sentiment, recalling in 2006: "They had some abandoned buildings, but you had a lot of buildings where people was livin' at. You had people who was nurses and doctors. You had construction workers. There was life there." See Afrika Bambaataa, interview by Nardwuar, *nardwuar.com*, February 10, 2006, http://www.nardwuar.com/vs/afrika_bambaataa/print/.

own: young Black people as superheroes. The underlying assertion was that despite deadly environmental conditions, or because of them, Black people, especially men, had the power to become larger-than-life figures, dynamic forces for good, even living gods.

These audiovisual representations emerged out of an ethos that was intensely lived. Perhaps the most well-known aspect of Bambaataa's mythology is how in the 1970s, he leveraged his leadership role as a warlord in the Black Spades, a notorious street gang, so as to convert its members into a more nonviolent social club that would come to be known as the Zulu Nation.[13] While the group eventually evolved into a celebrated global hip-hop cultural organization, in its earliest iterations the Zulu Nation was devoted to throwing dance parties and DJ nights around the Bronx River Project.[14] Bambaataa's efforts constituted a kind of reclamation project that sought to retain the camaraderie that came with gang membership while redirecting youth energy away from violence. His success owed in part to his reputation within the community as a former warlord who was feared but also respected for his inclinations toward peaceful resolutions of disagreements. As a former Black Spade described him in 1982: "There were so many gangs and he knew at least five members in every one. Any time there was a conflict, he would try and straighten it out. He was into communication."[15]

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[13] For a thorough biography of Bambaataa's experience forging the core elements of hip-hop culture out of the remnants of the Black Spades, see "Soul Salvation: The Mystery and Faith of Afrika Bambaataa" in Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 89-107. There is, admittedly, much more to be said about New York street gangs. For primers on the histories and cultures of groups in the Bronx, see "Blood and Fire, with Occasional Music: The Gangs of the Bronx" in Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 41-65, as well as the documentaries, *Rubble Kings* (Shan Nicholson, 2010) and its predecessor, *Flyin' Cut Sleeves* (Henry Chalfant, 1993).

[14] To clarify, Bambaataa created a series of groups that held music and dance events in the Bronx—and that sought to break down boundaries between various New York street gangs. Over time, these evolved into a global hip-hop cultural organization now known as the Universal Zulu Nation, branches of which have unique membership rites, belief systems, and teachings. Bambaataa details the progression of these groups in his notebooks. See Afrika Bambaataa, "Zulu Nation Infinity Lesson #1" and "Universal Zulu Nation Infinity Lesson #8." See Afrika Bambaataa Archive, notebooks, The Cornell Hip Hop Collection.

[15] Steven Hager, "Afrika Bambaataa's Hip-Hop" *The Village Voice*, September 21, 1982, 72.

Just as important was Bambaataa's record collection, the breadth of which proved to be one of the draws for his events. His title of "Master of Records" stemmed from his unexpected blends, as he mixed homemade recordings of the theme songs for *The Andy Griffith Show* and *The Munsters* with funky, drum-driven tracks from the likes of James Brown.[16] Though this array of selections certainly capitalized on their novelty, it also imparted Bambaataa's faith in the potential of unifying disparate elements. His approach to DJing, which then flowed into his production practices in the early 1980s, expressed, if not modeled, a similar belief in how varied peoples might be brought together. Though his more immediate concern was uniting former members of rival gangs, he also had a larger vision of forging solidarity among the diverse communities of the Bronx—and beyond. In a sense, Bambaataa mounted a campaign on two, intertwined fronts. On one hand, he worked to change the youth culture of the Bronx at the ground level. On the other, he looked to supplant how the area was perceived, demanding that his home and its community members, if not young Black and Latino people at large, not be represented by limited images of ruin and wanton violence. In this light, his musical and visual works, as vibrant, heroic and futuristic as they may have been, encompass a profound depth concerning how race was lived and understood in America at that time.

[16] Steven Hager recounts a "legendary battle" among DJs in which Bambaataa mixed these specific cuts. See Hager, "Afrika Bambaataa's Hip-Hop," 72. Further, Bambaataa's collection, which numbers around 20,000 vinyl records, is now housed at Cornell University. In September 2015 I studied approximately 500 of those artifacts. These were some of the earliest albums and singles that Bambaataa acquired in the 1970s, as identified by a numbering system and his signature. Even this limited cross-section from the collection attests to his omnivorous musical interests. The collection also sheds insight into which records were perhaps more popular at his DJ gigs as evidenced by the amount of physical wear to the vinyls and their covers. See Afrika Bambaataa Archive, vinyl record collection, The Cornell Hip Hop Collection.

"Electronic Funk"

For all its avowed futurity, Bambaataa's approach is anachronistic at times in its expressions and political tendencies. The multifaceted sprawl of his practices—numerous projects, self-made mythology, wild appearance, predilection for electronics, audiovisual hybridity, and tendencies toward the utopian and apocalyptic—has important precedents, namely an earlier generation of costumed funk troupes, along with their attendant mythologies and political programs. In this light, the Soulsonic Aesthetic can be understood as a mode of cosmic retrofuturism, a throwback, at least in part, built on the existing personas and music of James Brown, Sly Stone and George Clinton. Bambaataa's motivation lay in a belief about the cultural necessity of paying tribute to ones predecessors and a desire to amplify the liberating qualities of funk music via new production techniques. The retrofuturistic approach also entailed a twinning of nostalgia and prophecy. Bambaataa was inspired by radical political leaders of earlier eras, as he often remarked that the air of solidarity surrounding previous movements for racial liberation had winnowed since the 1960s.[17] This romantic appreciation for the past was interlaced with the recognition that conditions confronting Black urban communities—and the world at large—had evolved. In proclaiming to have played music on other planets, Bambaataa mobilized the interstellar as an operative metaphor to reframe terrestrial concerns endemic to the 1980s, in particular anxieties about racial conflict and the renewed threat of nuclear apocalypse.

[17] In elaborating on the political underpinnings of the Zulu Nation, Bambaataa claimed: "The black Americans need this 'cause they've been blind, deaf and dumb for too long. I guess it began in the Sixties. That's when we started to find our culture. Then the seventies seemed to put everyone to sleep. People forgot what had happened and turned their backs on the problems. Whereas in the Eighties you seem them reviving the Sixties again." See Pye, "Zulu Dawn."

As a concept, funk is not easily condensed.[18] This is in part because of how it absorbs other genres, reorienting their features around "The One," a rhythmic sensibility that emphasizes the first beat of every musical measure. Funk historian Rickey Vincent describes funk as a giant stylistic synthesizer that incorporates elements from "a wide range of Black musical traditions," including soul, blues, African percussion, psychedelic rock, jazz and digital instruments.[19] For Vincent, funk is about more than percussive grooves calibrated to move bodies on the dancefloor. He argues it comprises an aesthetic and culture that is inextricably concerned with Black liberation, as evidenced by its rejection of Western cultural investments in "formality, pretense, and self-repression" in exchange for "nastayness," "deliberate confusion" and "uninhibited, soulful behavior."[20] Although Bambaataa promoted himself as pioneering what was then nascent hip-hop music and culture, he also saw himself as following the traditions of funk but with an emphasis on the technological angle. In his words: "I started looking around, seeing that there was no black group that was strictly electronic. I said, 'We're going to be the first band to be electronic. I'm going to call my sound the Electro-Funk sound'."[21]

Further, Bambaataa often spoke of his aspirations to reach the status of his idols, artists often recognized as the holy trinity of funk: James Brown, Sly Stone and George Clinton. He revered Brown and Stone in equal measure, taking cues from them when it came to breakbeats, sequined attire and sociopolitical statements about race in America.[22]

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[18] As funk pioneer George Clinton claims, "The more one thinks about it, the harder it is to get the feel of The Funk." See his introduction to Rickey Vincent, *Funk: The Music, the People and the Rhythm of the One* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996), xiii.
[19] Vincent, 19.
[20] Vincent, 4-5.
[21] Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn, *Yes Yes Y'All: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop's First Decade* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002), 310, 315.
[22] Vincent argues that Brown was the first artist to develop a funk style. He singles out Stone from the wave of performers that followed in Brown's wake. See Vincent, 10.

Between its horn punches, syncopated percussion and affirmation of Black determination, Brown's "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" (1968) proved a galvanizing theme for Bambaataa.[23] Stone, on the other hand, offered a fuzzed-out sound and eccentricity that crossed genre, markets and race. His song "Stand" (1969), a call for cross-cultural solidarity in America, was another key song for Bambaataa, who once remarked: "When Sly was out there, he had the white market and the black market behind him. At first I thought he was weird. Who was this black guy playing rock music and wearing those strange clothes? Then he got to me."[24] In observing these two figures, Bambaataa recognized that there was power, or at least appeal, in flamboyant performance personas and the forthright fusing of racial politics and funky music.

The funkateer he emulated the most was Clinton, whose expansive Parliament-Funkadelic (P-Funk) enterprise and its far-reaching cosmology gave him a creative and business plan to emulate.[25] Clinton, a tireless songwriter and showman with a penchant for wearing diapers on stage, reached his greatest success when he blended his two bands, Funkadelic and Parliament, into a performance and recording empire in the mid-1970s. The result of this melding—distorted blues-rock with rubbery soul and gospel—was equal parts anal, hysterics, eroticism, electronics, and endless groove. Following that move, Clinton diversified his groups, spinning off a host of side projects for a variety of record labels while keeping their studio personnel intact. This sense of proliferation also

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[23] Bambaataa claims the song sparked him into "social awareness." See Afrika Bambaataa and Alien Ness, interview by Jim Fricke, *Experience Music Project*, Oct. 28, 2000, Charlie Ahearn Hip-Hop Archive, Series II: Documents and Manuscripts, box 6 folder 2, The Cornell Hip Hop Collection. As a DJ, Bambaataa was familiar with Brown's records, as their drumbreaks were party pleasers in the Bronx. Further, Bambaataa's notebooks include handwritten lyrics that blend snippets of famous Brown lines with original rhymes lauding his career. See Afrika Bambaataa Archive, notebooks.

[24] Chris May, "He Wants to Take You Higher," *Black Music & Jazz Review*, June 1984.

[25] As Bambaataa told *The Village Voice*: "See, George Clinton took the music of James Brown and Sly and the Family Stone and made a whole funk empire out of it. That's what I'm trying to do with rap." See Hager, "Afrika Bambaataa's Hip-Hop," 72.

guided Clinton's approach to stage performance. As Vincent describes, the P-Funk Mob, a "fifty-plus member aggregation of geniuses, lunatics, has-beens, wanna-bes, architects, saboteurs, and hangers-on was the epitome of the loose ensemble."[26] In addition to orchestrating P-Funk's amoeba-like spread, Clinton laced their sound with a manic musical ideology, one that eventually sought galactic redemption in the absurd and outrageous. The group's 1975 album, *Mothership Connection*, introduced a postmodern version of Black spiritual music, and in doing so, forged a link between transcendence and the cosmic.[27] As a lyric goes, "The desired effect is what you get when you improve your interplanetary funkmanship"; to practice funk is to move outward, to pursue the infinite.[28] This played out at P-Funk's concerts, replete with psychedelic get-ups and a full-blown spacecraft landing during which Clinton, aka "The Star Child" disembarked. In conjunction with this aural theology and performance spectacle, Clinton hired the artist Pedro Bell, whose "scatological landscapes" translated P-Funk's ideas into graphic (in all senses of the word) illustrations for the groups' album covers.[29] Artist Overton Loyd also contributed, rendering P-Funk's musical narratives as comic books and posters that came packaged with albums. According to Vincent, the combined efforts of this funky multimedia divinity rose above the racial conundrums of 1970s America by confounding normative, i.e. White male standards of social status, education, and erudition.[30] In a sense, the mob's celebration of the fantastic, the ghastly, and the bodily belied a complexity that rejected the racialized gauge that dictated sophistication, intellect and

[26] Vincent, 231. Vincent's text not only offers a detailed, album-by-album account of P-Funk's expansion, but he also hears (and sees) their music in much larger cosmological terms. See his chapter, "The Metaphysics of P: The Mothership Connection" in *Funk*, 253-264.
[27] Vincent, 242.
[28] Vincent, 242.
[29] Vincent, 237.
[30] Vincent, 235.

success. P-Funk then, "was the *ultimate* in African-American liberation," and as such, had both a musical and ideological appeal.[31] It is clear that for Bambaataa, Clinton's total-package approach was a model to strive for in more ways than one.

Though Bambaataa's ensemble mode echoed Clinton, this is not to say he simply attempted to copy the P-Funk sound, look or cosmology. Rather, he pursued a referential approach, paying tribute to his funk heroes. At a base level, Bambaataa hosted annual parties dedicated to their music. Flyers for the events cut and pasted visual iconography from the P-Funk mythology, such as the Sir Nose D'voidoffunk character, and pictures of the musicians (fig. 1-2).[32] These collage techniques typified the emergent hip-hop mode of sampling, which might be understood as an extension of funk's synthesizing logic.[33] Bambaataa went further, as his groups absorbed P-Funk's reliance on synthesizers, penchant for dressing up, and galactic spiritual scope. The results were an iteration of funk that was far more electronic, sanitized in its wildness, and direct with its political inclinations. Many of P-Funk's sonic signatures came at the hands of keyboardist Bernie Worrell, who, as described by Vincent, was particularly adept at "gothic, ethereal European classical chords and spacey keyboard riffs."[34] In contrast, Bambaataa, along with the Tommy Boy production crew of Arthur Baker and John Robie, pursued a more regimented, percussive synth attack, one that was as menacing as it was mystical, that whooshed and snapped like a rocket rather than spaced out. P-Funk grooved endlessly in concert. The foundation for the Soulsonic sound was machine-driven.

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[31] Vincent, 235.
[32] Flyers for James Brown and Sly Stone tribute nights had a similar aesthetic (fig. 3-4).
[33] Vincent hears hip-hop as a direct extension of the genealogy of funk, noting how Bambaataa took to naming funk musicians who influenced him on the sleeves of his records. See *Funk*, 289. Further, Bambaataa was open about this connection. In his words, "We wanted to show people that hip-hop was a continuation of the funk George Clinton gave us." See "Afrika Bambaataa," *Black Echoes*, July 14, 1984, Afrika Bambaataa Archive, publicity and ephemera, The Cornell Hip Hop Collection.
[34] Vincent, 240.

Additionally, Bambaataa espoused an uninhibited party atmosphere, a "louder get loose and nitty gritty thing."[35] As he exclaimed, "We don't want anyone to be clean and cool at our concerts, we want you to get loose and crazy, tear the roof off the sucker and stuff."[36] While that language echoes P-Funk's hysteria, Bambaataa operated with a different definition of wild, eschewing the unruly eroticism and "nastayness." Instead, Bambaataa and his retinue fashioned themselves as fantastical warriors, superheroes simultaneously silly in their leotards yet imposing. This ratcheting back of the wanton for more confrontational personas exposes, at least in part, how cultural conditions had shifted between Clinton's emergence in the late 1960s and Bambaataa's rise a decade later. More specifically, this contrast marks a downward cycling in the conditions of possibility for Black life in America. As Vincent argues, Clinton's antics are a response to a defining conflict of his moment, i.e. P-Funk's aesthetic made a mockery of the social order that had long vilified racial Blackness as a means to elevate Whiteness. The traction of Clinton's message—that a Black funk freak might achieve widespread success—attests to a different potential for mobility, a liberatory openness about who exactly a Black subject could be at that moment. Clinton blasted out a space for himself and his adherents to truly not give a shit and in doing so, negotiated a moment that entailed different possibilities for Black expression and life. Bambaataa's cleaning up of the funk might be interpreted as a reductive move, a capitulation in a fight over social status. I suggest that instead, it be read as symptomatic of a more constrictive environment, one in which the pressures on Black urban communities in America had intensified and subsequent possibilities had narrowed. Bambaataa's reformulation of Clinton's aesthetic

[35] "Afrika Bambaataa," *Black Echoes*.
[36] Ibid.

implicitly acknowledged that the stakes had changed in the 1980s, especially for the communities of the Bronx where he lived and performed. In the face of systematic abandonment by civic structures and resulting social and political insularity, Bambaataa embarked on a "living dream" for expansion at the planetary level, to "turn death into life" as one music writer put it.[37] The efficacy of Bambaataa's statements was that they not only looked to sustain young people in the Bronx. His work also effectively punctured the sense of insularity, even if only temporarily, by appealing to diverse crowds, especially White punk rockers of the Downtown New York scene.

"The time has come"

Prior to 1981, Bambaataa, fully engrossed in the Bronx DJ circuit, was skeptical of recorded music as a viable creative or financial endeavor.[38] This was in part based on his experience with Paul Winley, a Harlem label owner who released Bambaataa's first official productions, two 12-inch single takes on "Zulu Nation Throwdown" in 1980.[39] The song failed to land with a significant splash, but most irksome to Bambaataa was that Winley changed the agreed upon sound of the song. As he recounted: "It was crazy. I recorded the songs to just [be] drums. When the record came out, Winley added a bass and some crazy guitar music."[40] The sound of Bambaataa's next production, "Jazzy Sensation" (1981), a hip-hop interpolation of singer Gwen McCrae's disco burner "Funky Sensation" (1981), also has a live band sound. In hindsight, these songs can be heard as

[37] "Living dream" is from Afrika Bambaataa & The Soul Sonic Force, "Planet Rock," Tommy Boy TB-823, 1982, 33 1/3 rpm single. Also see Stuart Cohn, "Extra-Terra-Rap" *Heavy Metal* (August 1983): 4.
[38] Bambaataa reflected on this skepticism: "A lot of us in the Zulu Nation, we stayed away from that [recording] at first because a lot of people thought once it got into vinyl it was going to kill the culture." See, Afrika Bambaataa and Alien Ness, interview by Jim Fricke.
[39] "Volume 1" features Cosmic Force while "Volume 2" features Soul Sonic Force.
[40] Hager, "Afrika Bambaataa's Hip-Hop."

scene setters that by contrast made his shift to electronic instrumentation more dramatic, even radical. As he remarked in 1982 when asked about his work with Winley, "What we did on his label—that's the past, it's not our style anymore."[41]

Bambaataa announced this new electronic approach with a trilogy of songs for Tommy Boy that was driven primarily by synthesizers and drum machines. It is difficult to overstate the influence of their sonic imprint, particularly the musical shockwaves that emanated from the landing of "Planet Rock" in 1982. The sonic and lyrical signatures of those works owe as much to Bambaataa as they do the studio production duo behind them, Baker and keyboard player Robie, and the Soulsonic Force.[42] This is not to detract from Bambaataa's centrality to the music; in fact, he was quite open about how he understood himself as a participant in the creative process.[43] In his role, he was much more concerned with concepts and ideas, isolated riffs and musical moments—and with the possibilities that emerged from bringing different collaborators together. This experimental sensibility found its most culturally seismic expression in the startling synthesis of digital textures and booming machine-funk beats of "Planet Rock."[44]

The sound of "Planet Rock" is indelibly electronic: synthesizer keyboard runs, drum machine beats, digital samples from the recording of an orchestra. Even the vocals

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[41] Steven Hager, "DJ Afrika Bambaataa: It's the Sure Shot," *East Village Eye*, June 1982, 11.

[42] As Baker recounted, "The whole theme of 'Planet Rock,' I think probably G.L.O.B.E. had the verses." See "Key Tracks: Arthur Baker on 'Planet Rock'" *Red Bull Music Academy Daily* (April 4, 2013). http://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2013/04/key-tracks-arthur-baker-on-planet-rock. Additionally, The Cornell Hip-Hop Collection has a set of lyrics for "Planet Rock" in Bambaataa's handwriting, which does not include a number of verses. This version contains the main lyrical theme and architecture of the song, including notations for when the lyrics drop out for "music." In short, this set of rhymes complicates Baker's claim about the "theme" of the song. See Afrika Bambaataa Archive, notebooks.

[43] Bambaataa acknowledge: "I don't do much rapping. But I help produce my records. They may be written or produced by whomever, but you can be sure I had something to do with the getting the sound I want, whether it's a certain chant, keyboard riff, drum pattern or a speed-up on the synthesizers." See Connie Johnson, "Rapping, Out of Afrika," *Los Angeles Times*, June 30, 1985, 73.

[44] A host of versions (and bootlegs) of "Planet Rock" are in circulation. My analysis is based on the original "Vocal Version" released in 1982 by Tommy Boy.

have been processed, human voices rendered as digitized timbres to add to the mix.[45] The song opens with Bambaataa's robotic exhortations, to which the "party people" respond with yells that also resound with a cyborg echo. These vocal back-and-forths lean into a triple strike of digital sound, spearheaded by "ORCH5," a sample included in the library discs that came with the Fairlight Computer Model Instrument, the first commercially available sampler. That sound snippet carries the combined weight of an orchestra, specifically a booming chord from Igor Stravinsky's ballet, *The Firebird*.[46] The ORCH5 punches are synced to a blitz of computerized bass drum, cowbell, and handclaps that glide along to a ratatat clicking of sixteenth note closed hihats, all produced by the Roland TR-808 drum machine. A synthesized bassline bounces between the computer percussion and orchestral hits, a further rhythmic propellant accented by zaps and explosions of digital effects and samples. As journalist Steven Hager described it in 1982: "It sounds like funk from outer space, but it really comes from the Southeast Bronx."[47]

With this song, Bambaataa not only introduced a new sonic architecture for hip-hop, he laid out an attendant social agenda. In effect, he amplified nascent currents in the music and culture, thrusting existing predilections toward technology and the cosmic to the forefront, all with the ultimate purpose of generating cross-cultural solidarity. The progress of this event developed with a marked duality, as the sonic and lyrical rush of "Planet Rock" is propelled by a darker, expressly electronic musical edge. I contend that this underlying menace is not so much a comment about technology itself as it is an implicit expression of the lived conditions of abandonment that were progressing along

[45] Bambaataa claimed the distinctive vocals were created with an "electronic mike" as opposed to a vocoder. See Hager, "DJ Afrika Bambaataa: It's the Sure Shot."
[46] Robert Fink, "ORCH5, or the Classical Ghost in the Hip-Hop Machine," in *Listen Again: A Momentary History of Pop Music*, ed. Eric Weisbard (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 234.
[47] Hager, "DJ Afrika Bambaataa: It's the Sure Shot."

racial lines at that historical moment.[48] For Bambaataa, electronic music technologies were a creative boon in how they became the perfect expressive vehicles for messages of mobility and unity. Those digital sounds, particularly in their melodic execution and tone, simultaneously evoke the backdrop of social constraints and forced insularity that made those messages so necessary.

As the song unfurls, the synthesizer becomes the central feature, accenting the rhythmic structure and refracting the direction of its movement. Robie recreates melodic lines from two songs that were already popular at hip-hop parties: "Trans-Europe Express" by the German synth-pop group Kraftwerk and "The Mexican" by Babe Ruth, a British rock band.[49] Robie's keyboard work, which was so uncanny in its imitation of Kraftwerk's melodies that it registered as samples, signals just how much the identity of "Planet Rock" is indebted to the group.[50] The inspiration had to do with its melodic sensibility, but also its electronic drum sounds, in particular from the song "Numbers."[51] Bambaataa's original idea was to loop a drum break from the song "Super Sporm" by Captain Sky, but as Baker recounted, a machinic palate was a more natural fit.[52] The production team also boosted the tempo, gearing up from the gradual acceleration of

[48] Tom Silverman of Tommy Boy hypothesized: "The stiff, electronic sound, that's a way of dealing with the technology that's invading our lives. But if people ever start relating to machines alone—well then we're in trouble." See Jim Miller, "Scifi Street Sounds," *Newsweek*, June 20, 1983, 80. Ten years later cultural critic Tricia Rose offered a similar reading, arguing "Planet Rock" should be understood as a Black response to changing conditions in post-industrial America. In her words, "People said, 'Look, technology is here; we can choose to be left behind or we can try to take control of the beast'." See Dery, 213.
[49] "Trans-Europe Express" was the title track of Kraftwerk's 1977 album for Capitol Records. "The Mexican" appeared on Babe Ruth's 1972 album, *First Base*, on Harvest.
[50] In Bambaataa's words: "A lot of people think we sampled Kraftwerk but it's just not true. John Robie was a bad-ass synthesizer player, so he was so good in playing stuff that it sounded like they sampled the record." See "Interview: Afrika Bambaataa, October 1998," by Frank Broughton, *Red Bull Music Academy Daily*, last modified April 7, 2017, http://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2017/04/afrika-bambaataa-interview. The emulation spurred a lawsuit that resulted in Tommy Boy paying "over six times as much for a sample as it would have paid for using a whole composition." See Kembrew McLeod, *Creative License: The Law and Culture of Digital Sampling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 115.
[51] This song had only recently appeared on the group's *Computer World* (1981) album.
[52] See "Key Tracks: Arthur Baker on 'Planet Rock'."

"Trans-Europe Express." That song ratchets along at 108 beats per minute, but "Planet Rock" booms out of the gate at a pace that is 20 beats faster. The debt to Kraftwerk was also a matter of thematic content. As the title indicates, "Trans-Europe Express" evoked the experience of traversing the continent. In contrast, Bambaataa moves from the continental to a trajectory that was at once planetary and personal. "Planet Rock" moves in multiple directions at once, across the environs of the Earth to the spaces and times of human thought and feeling, i.e. what the lyrics refer to as soul.

The lyrical content of "Planet Rock" is not driven by storytelling. Rather, the vocal patter follows the conventions of live performance, as the lyrics stitch together a series of call-and-response routines, appeals for listeners to hit the dance floor, and group members hollering their names.[53] The lyrics mention the atmosphere of the club, but the driving force is less about the visual details of the scene than it is about amplifying sensations of movement. "Planet Rock" evokes a palpable, multisensorial affect of motion. Playful rhymes call on listeners to "twist and turn," "bounce and pounce," and "make your body sway."[54] Just as important are commands to take the experience in, to "taste the funk" and "feel the groove."[55] At times the song urges embodied mobility for the pure sensory pleasures of funk. The lyrics go deeper though:

> It's time to chase your dreams
> Up out ya seats
> Make your body sway
> Socialize, get down
> Let your soul lead the way[56]

[53] It appears Bambaataa plotted other songs that match this approach. His notebooks detail plans for undated works entitled "Get on Down" and "Let's Groove," both of which include notes for crowd noise and call-and-response routines. See Afrika Bambaataa Archive, notebooks.
[54] Afrika Bambaataa & The Soul Sonic Force, "Planet Rock."
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.

Physical movement is made synonymous with pursuing one's aspirations. The suggestion is that different possibilities for personal fulfillment emerge in the space and time of the party. With "Planet Rock," Bambaataa challenged conventional notions of the dynamics—and possibilities—endemic to the dancefloor. In effect, he proposed an event spanning infinite space and time, and that subsequently yields very different potentials for dreaming. Hence, a calibrated reinforcement of the cosmic affinities of the song title.

The desire for an endless event finds expression in the frequent variations on the phrase "rock it, don't stop" that anchor the chorus, a host of verses and conclusion. This familiar hailing of the dancefloor is an explicit demand for the party to continue, in particular when followed with, "Keep tickin' and tockin', work it all around the clock."[57] The symbol of the clock implies both a future-oriented trajectory and cyclical motion, which is emphasized by the "all around" line. That suggestion echoes in the multiple valences of the "rock it, don't stop it" phrase itself. "Rock it" sounds like "rocket," which conjures flight paths and orbiting loops of spacecraft. The cyclical evocation of the phrase comes full circle when "don't stop" is returned to the mix. The phrase folds back on itself with its alliteration, the sound of "stop" ricocheting back to "rock," in effect, kick-starting the lyric all over again. The cyclical logic of the phrase, which again, dominates so many of the rhymes, resonates with the relentless mechanical pulse. Though the song inevitably concludes, it does so with a spirit that might continue forever. In the closing moments, the crowd joins the Soulsonic Force in chanting, "Gotta rock it, don't stop it / Gotta rock it, don't stop."[58] The performers and beat eventually cut out, but the "party people" carry on, announcing an emphatic "don't stop!" as the last statement of

[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.

the song. The detail of that final repetition is crucial in that it proposes an open series of transferences, from the performers to the crowd to listeners all over.

Though this idealism might register as the stuff of fantasy, "Planet Rock" was designed to produce an affect of those new possibilities in what was the lived space and time of dancing or even just listening. In a sense, the song propelled its aspirations and sensibilities into existence. As the lyrics exclaimed, this is a "living dream," not some naive delusion. The live format—with its shoutouts to the crowd and unison chants—compelled the realization of what that other world might feel like, as well as participation in it. From another perspective, while the song prophesized the collective possibilities of another world, it ultimately affirmed spaces and times that existed, specifically at hip-hop events across the Bronx. The sensations of mobility that "Planet Rock" evoked were already being lived by young partygoers and, in a tangible way, some new mode of opportunity had opened up in the black holes of their embattled Bronx communities. To be clear, I am not claiming that some substantive economic or political possibilities suddenly emerged in 1982 as a result of the song in general. Instead, "Planet Rock" and its accompanying message tapped into a real desire to be able to dream differently, and, in doing so, expanded the boundaries of how such dreams might actually be lived.

In this light, "Planet Rock" is a bridge statement designed to forge links between multiple spaces and times, the lived and the imagined, and ultimately, bring together disparate peoples. The song was grounded in a sense of collectivity that for Bambaataa had everything to do with confronting racial divisions in America, specifically in how such boundaries manifested in the geography of New York City and the retrenchment of segregation in the music industry. In Bambaataa's experience, while Downtown

Manhattan had become the seemingly exclusive province of White people, Uptown was largely considered Black and Latino territory—and those distinct worlds and cultures seldom interacted. As he experienced firsthand, such separation amplified racist ideologies that only widened the existing gap. Within this self-fulfilling cycle, the results were lived asymmetrically. Black and Latino residents of the Bronx were increasingly rendered as both invisible and hyper visible, their communities further abandoned by civic structures while simultaneously depicted as ridden by violence and drugs.

Bambaataa was also aware of how racial partitions continued to shape music sales and radio airplay, typically via genre. For example, people who listened to soul or R&B were assumed to be Black. The industry did more than simply presume genres had different customer demographics; it worked to institutionalize those differences. This was especially the case with the widespread practice in FM radio of narrowcasting, a programming philosophy driven by the idea of delivering content based on listener demographics.[59] For example, the logic was that playing only rock music would attract the audience most coveted by advertisers: young White males. This was a marked shift from the more freeform FM programming of the 1960s and 1970s that mixed music from different genres. As it stood, in the early 1980s, generic conventions cycled back into what was for all intents and purposes, racial segregation. As John Rockwell, the music critic for *The New York Times*, described:

> While black music has been and remains the primary inspiration for the Anglo-American rock style, the vast majority of the most famous, most handsomely

[59] Many industry commentators attribute this approach to radio consultant Lee Abrams. For a brief but informative discussion of his ideas, see Dan Charnas, *The Big Payback: The History and Business of Hip-Hop* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 296-297. Further, the tortured linkages between race, genre and radio programming have much longer histories. Suffice to say, Bambaataa's concerns about the re-segregation of the American music industry were not unfounded. For more on the relationship between race and genre, see Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

> rewarded pop stars are white. … The pop-music business, and hence the listening habits of most of pop's audience, are more strictly segregated today than they were 10 or 20 years ago, when black music was a commonplace on top-10 sales charts and top-40 playlists.[60]

"Planet Rock," then was designed to intervene in both of those scenarios. At its heart, the process does not seem all that complicated: Create a song that would appeal to people from different demographics and bring them together in close physical proximity. That exposure, when accomplished via the rush of musical movement, might engender substantive cross-racial understanding, if not solidarity.

The efficacy of this model resonated with a process Bambaataa had personally experienced. In part, he arrived at his musical solution after performing on the Downtown art gallery circuit. That experience exposed him to emergent new wave and punk cultures that were more accepting of hip-hop than he expected. His shift toward an electronic style, and subsequently "Planet Rock," was the direct result of the encounters:

> I got the idea from playing in a lot of punk rock clubs. The punkers were getting off on our kind of music so I decided to make a record that would appeal to the white crowd and still keep the sound that would appeal to the hip hoppers. So I combined the two elements.[61]

Later on he put this in more definite racial terms: "When we made 'Planet Rock,' when we got into the Electro-Funk style of hip-hop, we was really trying to reach the Blacks,

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[60] John Rockwell, "In Pop Music, the Races Remain Far Apart," *The New York Times*, March 18, 1984, H1. Bambaataa's press clippings include this article, making it one of the few pieces not directly related to his career that he kept. See Afrika Bambaataa Archive, publicity and ephemera, The Cornell Hip-Hop Collection.

[61] Hager, "DJ Afrika Bambaataa: It's the Sure Shot." Baker confirms this impulse drove the production: "From day one that was the idea. It isn't like we lucked into that, we were going for that. … That had a lot to do with Bam, because Bam was open to that. … He was open to that because he was DJing downtown and uptown. He was the first guy to really be able to cross those boundaries." See "Key Tracks: Arthur Baker on 'Planet Rock'." Further, it is important to note the slippery logic of Bambaataa's comment. He could be construed as echoing the idea that genres are linked with racial groups. As he put it, punk rockers "were getting off to *our kind* of music" [my emphasis]. The suggestion might be that hip-hop is an inherently Black music in the same way that punk evokes racial Whiteness. Such associations had long been shaped by industrial and cultural mechanisms; they were socially constructed. Bambaataa's comment could also be read in terms of ownership. People self-identify; they see and hear themselves, as well as ideas about race, in musical styles, which is quite different from an inherent link.

Latinos, and the punk rock whites."[62] Further, the impact of those experiences was more than just musical. Early in his career, he reflected on how his exposure to different racial groups influenced his personal outlook: "I used to be [racist], and I was much more aggressive about it too. Since I've started working more and more with non-blacks, my attitude has changed. People are very different, regardless of color."[63] While this statement reveals a personal evolution, it also speaks to how Bambaataa understood music and the lived experience of race to be interwoven. Bambaataa intended to sustain a kind of environment, a world in which listeners could feel free to, as the lyrics put it, "Be what you be." Rather than seek to erase the historical, lived differences among these groups, the song proposes a world where they might be acknowledged—and shared. In this light, the appeal along racial lines—the move "to reach the Blacks, the Latinos, and the punk rock whites"—was a calibrated step toward the assembly of a diverse collective. This spirit and idea—that intervening via a musical thread has the potential to reshape the fabric of society and culture—guided the development of his aesthetic.

Though Bambaataa was outspoken about the idea that electronics would sonically propel racial unity, the relationship between the two was largely unexplained. So, why electro-funk? How did synthesizers, drum machines and digitally processed vocals take on this charge? Why did that instrumentation appeal to diverse listening groups? Critics have suggested various factors, including a sense of timeliness, novelty and an expressive potential that resonated with Black listeners. I argue that the decisive factor was the cosmic connotations that electronic instruments were endowed with—and that "Planet Rock" amplified with its music and rhetoric. In 1982, Bambaataa, Baker and Robie were

[62] Fricke and Ahearn, 315.
[63] Terry McCoy, "Birth of a Nation," Afrika Bambaataa Archive, publicity and ephemera, The Cornell Hip Hop Collection.

on the edge of a larger wave of electronic music production in America. Critic Robert Palmer described the context: "Instrumentally, the synthesizer, which conquered the British pop charts in 1982, made itself felt in almost every corner of American pop in 1983."[64] In a sense the Tommy Boy team tapped into and fostered, an emergent musical zeitgeist. Musicians working across idioms—funk, jazz, progressive rock, electroacoustic, etc.—had already experimented with similar instrumentation, but the results never sounded like this. "Planet Rock" landed with an air of newness. Cultural critic and hip-hop historian Tricia Rose, approaches Bambaataa's "funky cyborgs" from a more theoretical angle, specifically the intersecting vectors of racial Blackness and political economy. She claims the emulation of Kraftwerk's sound was an implicit statement about the power dynamics of technology use:

> I believe that what made Kraftwerk so interesting to Afrika Bambaataa … is the way it demonstrated a mastery over technology, and mastery over technology engenders a degree of awe, particularly in black folks whose access to technology is limited. So some of it is sheer awe, but it's also about having an open, creative mind toward different ways of producing sound.[65]

In this light, Bambaataa's pursuit of a "strictly electronic" sound had larger implications, in particular the empowerment of Black creativity. Though White studio musicians completed much of the production, part of the awe of "Planet Rock" was that it affirmed an unrecognized tradition of Black musicians performing with new technologies.[66]

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[64] Robert Palmer, "Energy and Creativity Added up to Exciting Pop," *The New York Times*, December 25, 1983, H19.
[65] Dery, 212.
[66] Rose goes further, claiming the Kraftwerk emulation was a mode of resistance. She contends: "What Afrika Bambaataa and hip-hoppers like him saw in Kraftwerk's use of the robot was an understanding of themselves as already having been robots. Adopting 'the robot' reflected a response to an existing condition: namely, that they were labor capitalism, that they had very little value as people in this society. By taking on the robotic stance, one is 'playing with the robot.' It's like wearing body armor that identifies you as an alien: if it's always on anyway, in some symbolic sense, perhaps you could master the wearing of this guise in order to use it against your interpolation." See Dery, 212. Although I agree with Rose, she speaks to a different point than why electronics were the backbone for Bambaataa's message of solidarity.

Though the preceding explanations—zeitgeist, novelty, affirmation—all hold true, they do not entirely speak to the unifying factor of Bambaataa's electronic sound. For example, White punk rockers may not have caught, or for that matter, agreed with the message of Black empowerment.[67] The response to "Planet Rock" had more to do with how the song constituted a musical mode of science fiction. This was reflected in the reactions from music journalists. In the wake of "Planet Rock," publications from *Heavy Metal* to *Newsweek* offered headlines that included "High-Tech Hip-Hop," "Extra-Terra-Rap," "Scifi Street Sounds," and "Afrika Bambaataa: The Force is With Him."[68] Bambaataa's aesthetic, an all-encompassing, "strictly electronic" sound, registered as otherworldly. As Bambaataa claimed in 1983, "We're trying to tell people that there are places—not just Earth—where people get away from their problems in a discotheque or a funkatheque or whatever."[69] The distinctive sound of "Planet Rock" rendered the everyday dance floor as uncanny, a space that was recognizable but simultaneously extraordinary in its envisioned scope. At a fundamental level, this sensibility was accomplished via electronic instrumentation, as the machine sound arrived with a host of cosmic associations—the infinite, futurity, mobility, the imaginative—connotations that the song's structure and lyrical content then maximized. In turn, those meanings transmit a palpable affect of expansion—and openness. The song forged a sense of unity, or at least looked to generate an environment in which listeners might be more receptive to

[67] Further, the foundation for the Uptown-Downtown connection was not all that stable. For example, *The Village Voice* detailed a White crowd's disapproval of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five opening for The Clash in 1981. The audience shouted down the party rhymes and responded with a hail of cups. As the article notes, "Rather than achieve a cultural crossover it [the concert] threatened to widen the gap." See Michael Hill, "The Clash at the Clampdown," *The Village Voice*, June 10-16, 1981, 74.
[68] See Barry Michael Cooper, "High-Tech Hip-Hop," *The Village Voice*, May 25, 1982; Cohn, 4; Jim Miller, 80; David Hinckley, "Afrika Bambaataa: The Force is With Him," *Daily News*, July 3, 1984.
[69] Johnny Waller "Afrikan Dub Chapter One," *Sounds*, February 19, 1983, 23.

unity, through its aural textures. As the famous Sun Ra adage goes, *space is the place*.[70] Where much of the media commentary only served to identify and describe this new futuristic, machinic sound, others made the cultural connection. As critic Gary Jardim wrote: "D.j.s like Bambaataa are reprogramming, reprocessing, and twisting the insides of pop music textures to find the soul beat patterns of a pancultural future."[71] A core reason for the popularity of "Planet Rock" and the resonance of its messages was that while it implicitly spoke to lived concerns and desires of the early 1980s, it ultimately sounded like it came from another planet—and foretold a different experience.

"We are your future, you are the past"

The follow-ups, "Looking for the Perfect Beat" and "Renegades of Funk," expanded the guiding theme of the Soulsonic Aesthetic—social change as rendered via technology—further unfurling an ensemble of ideas about the cosmos, electronics, race, coalition, and increasingly Armageddon. With this song trilogy, Bambaataa stayed consistent in his drive for change, but in 1983 the vehicle of that message modulated. The tension that "Planet Rock" sounded—the dual sense of light and darkness—split, as each tone takes precedent in the follow-ups.

As the title metaphorically suggests, "Looking for the Perfect Beat" was in part an extension of Bambaataa's earlier message to pursue one's aspirations. This played out in its rhythmic structure, which entailed an ever-shifting exploration of the limits of the TR-

[70] As an aside, Bambaataa was aware of Sun Ra, but funk musicians were his primary influences. As he told *The Source*: "I also knew about Sun Ra and the esoteric jazz music he was makin'. But there was nothin' gettin' FUNKY." See J. The Sultan, "The Old School: An Oral History," *The Source*, January/February 1990, 8. Bambaataa's record collection includes at least one Sun Ra album, a re-release of the *Atlantis* project on Impulse in 1973 (fig. 5). See Afrika Bambaataa Archive, vinyl record collection.
[71] Gary Jardim, "Perfection," *Village Voice*, January 19, 1983. Further, Jim Miller of *Newsweek* was less authoritative, but asked: "Could it be that a sound made by machines will finally tear down the barriers between black and white pop music?" See Jim Miller, 80.

808 drum machine, and the lyrics, which proposed a series of aphorisms about searching for the meaning of one's life.[72] Most notable is how the delivery of the lyrics registers the song's points. Writer Stuart Cohn delineated the song's style from the story-driven style of Bambaataa's contemporaries: "Soul Sonic's rap language leaves narrative behind, replacing it with a word and sound collage. In their repetition and variation, the words suggest religious incantations and trances."[73] What Cohn identified as sacred forms extend from the conventions of hip-hop stage shows. The lyrical efficacy of "Looking for the Perfect Beat" lies in the intrinsic participatory suggestion of its main theme, i.e. "a chorus you can sing." In effect, the Soulsonic Force's recitation, in which group members reply to the main statements, models how listeners might also sing (or chant) along:

> Looking for the perfect beat (Searching for the perfect beat)
> Looking for the perfect beat (Seeking for the perfect beat)
> I must get mine (I'm out to get it)
> I must get mine (I'm out to get it)[74]

As Cohn suggests, the effect is incantatory. The flow of consonant rhymes not only describes an active search, but their percussive repetition aurally reinforces that the search is necessary and justified. The phrase "looking for the perfect beat" is a persistent refrain, uttered by different parties and in various lyrical combinations. If the song is spiritual, that faith is nondenominational, if not secular. Bambaataa described the openness of the message: "In our new record people think we're just talking about music or that we're looking for a certain sound or something … but we're talking whatever your

[72] Robie recounted: "When we did 'Looking for the Perfect Beat,' we explored the parameters of the 808. It wasn't like other conventional drum machines where you'd establish a beats per minute and then you'd have to listen to a click track and then play a drum along with the click. You can basically play and change and change your mind and add. It was very, very liberating." See Red Bull Music Academy, *beat:repeat NYC: Afrika Bambaataa - Looking for the Perfect Beat*, online video, 5:27, May 22, 2014, https://vimeo.com/96085345.
[73] Cohn, 4.
[74] Afrika Bambaataa and Soulsonic Force, "Looking for the Perfect Beat."

beat is, if you want drugs, or love, if you want a humanitarian life—then that's your perfect beat."[75] Or, as the lyrics emphasize, "Now in this world of music, there are many different tones."[76] The song encourages ardor for the search, yet the goal, "the perfect beat," is individualized and does not accord with normative religious expectations.

Though the lyrics are oriented toward individuals, the song takes a wider view of how discrete "perfect" beats might coexist. Bambaataa's opening verse foregrounds the individual search as happening within expansive spheres of collectivity:

> Universal people, looking for the perfect beat
> All the world nations, looking for the perfect beat
> Mighty Zulu Nation, they have found the perfect beat
> Afrika Bambaataa, I possess the perfect beat beat beat beat[77]

This series operates as a zoom lens from the cosmic ("universal people") to the state ("all the world's nations") to a local, albeit soon to be global, community group ("Mighty Zulu Nation") to the individual (Bambaataa himself). The suggestion of these opening lines, if not the entire song, would seem to be self-evident. As Cohn claims, the song "contains a utopian, one-world message."[78] In short, all the "many different tones" are fundamentally equal as constituent elements that make up a larger perfect pulse of the world. The idea is that pursuing and realizing one's perfect beat helps perfect the world at large.

Bambaataa's invocation of the term "universal," as idealistic and well intentioned as it may seem on its face, is more freighted and potentially contradictory when extended to the matter of racial inequality. At one level, the use comprised a provocation for a rethinking of the issues of difference and community from a longer perspective. As Bambaataa explained: "When I talk about 'universal people,' I'm not talking just about

[75] Dorrell, 7.
[76] Afrika Bambaataa and Soulsonic Force, "Looking for the Perfect Beat."
[77] Ibid.
[78] Cohn, 4.

Earth—I'm talking about Saturn and Mars too, because it's foolish for people to think that Earth—this little dot in the whole universe—is the only place to have people!"[79] In this light, "universal" theorizes humankind on a telescoping scale, at once miniscule but also belonging to a much larger, potentially infinite, community of beings. Both ends of that lens would appear to recast socially constructed divisions of people as moot in the grander scheme of the universe. For Bambaataa, outer space functioned as a metaphorical vehicle through which to address the fallacy of how human life was structured around ideas about race. The idea was to supplant prejudiced commitments to racial hierarchies with greater awareness of a cosmic commonality that would be more accepting of the "many different tones" in the universe. This reverse galactic perspective, i.e. looking back on the conditions of Earth from afar, may have cast a wider spotlight on a problem that was intensifying at that historical moment, particularly across America, but it did little to pinpoint the root causes, let alone the lived effects and stakes, of racial difference. Instead, the song laid the situation at the feet of listeners, cajoling them to seek personal fulfillment, the ideal outcome of which would ostensibly be a transformed world.

Further, Bambaataa presented the universal as linked to, if not synonymous with a more tortuous term: color-blindness. Not long after "Looking for the Perfect Beat" was released, he pilloried how racial segregation manifested in American radio:

> There's a lot of racism in the business here. In England you have a top four of Culture Club, Yellowman, Herbie Hancock, Kiss. In America, no one station would play them all, because radio is fragmented. Which is crazy because the American dream is everybody listening to everybody else, right? To me, music is color-blind and universal.[80]

[79] Waller, 23.
[80] See Hinckley. Further, Bambaataa has returned to the color-blind idea. For example, in 2000 he stated: "Hip-hop music is colorless, it's what you put on it with your rap, that you can make it a black thing or a white thing or the universal thing." See, Afrika Bambaataa and Alien Ness, interview by Jim Fricke.

In this statement, Bambaataa emphasizes that the industry sustained associations between musical genres and racial groups, arguing that the business practice of partitioned airplay was symptomatic of racist ideology at work. He does not so much suggest a solution as he makes an appeal for a different way of thinking about music itself. To follow his logic, music has no natural or fixed racial component; it is open and available to any and all audiences. While this may register as coming from a utopian perspective, Bambaataa's comment gestures toward the ways in which music becomes racialized, that is, how it gets imbued with ideas about race. As he suggests, the business—the system of radio programming by genre—was a major part of the equation, one that effectively trained listeners to hear certain musics as naturally connected to certain groups.

Bambaataa's statement is ultimately hazardous given how he invokes racial color-blindness and then links it to the universal. Though he may have had a very different conception of what the color-blind term meant, he echoed a racist ideology that had achieved cultural dominance in the post-Civil Rights era.[81] The term describes the spurious notion that with the advancement of legal forms of equality, race was effectively no longer a substantive factor in American life. Such an ideology is quite seductive in that it resonates as an attractive ideal, i.e. a society in which people are not judged by race. Yet this "blindness" is precisely the problem as it is also refuses to perceive the circumstances, histories and actions that buttress hierarchies of racial difference that were still very much in effect. Claims to color-blindness are tantamount to a mode of discrimination masquerading as anti-discrimination, as they provide a smokescreen to not acknowledge how race is actually experienced. This logic is particularly insidious as it not only erases the lived experiences of difference, it also serves to legislate

[81] See Bonilla-Silva, 2.

discriminatory practices that maintain systems of racial oppression. Bambaataa's mention of color-blind music then is disconcerting. Even as it may have served to highlight the machinations of racist industry practices, it forwarded the notion that perhaps listening to music should also entail a set of mufflers when it came to its entanglements with race. In other words, there is an unresolved contradiction at play. While Bambaataa was committed to sustaining a world in which "there are many different tones," it is not clear how color-blind music celebrates, yet alone acknowledges, those differences. This paradox extends further given how he connects color-blind to universal. In the case of the lyrics of "Looking for the Perfect Beat," it is not simply music that is universal, but also people. To follow this train of associations, to be a universal person is to be a color-blind person. While this suggestion is certainly admirable as an ideal, it also comes packed with a host of concerns about how it may invalidate the lived experiences of racial oppression—and projects a twisted sense of equality into the future.[82]

"Mighty Renegades"

Only months after "Looking for the Perfect Beat" hit the airwaves, Bambaataa released "Renegades of Funk." His previous songs were more abstract in their delivery, for example, the sensorial impressions of "Planet Rock" and incantations of "Looking for the Perfect Beat." "Renegades of Funk" was explicit in its purpose, as the lyrics unleashed a notable didacticism: *We are renegades on a mission to avert a catastrophe in*

[82] Further, while Bambaataa claimed an ethos that was entirely open, it appears that his conception of "universal" was implicitly male-oriented. This was reflected in the personnel of his groups, which were dominated by male performers; the exceptions being Queen Lisa Lee and Wanda Dee of Cosmic Force. When questioned about the gender dynamics of his groups, specifically the Zulu Nation, early in his career, Bambaataa states there were "female chapters for girls to join." The interviewer asks if that sort of division was "somewhat sexist," to which Bambaataa replied: "No. Anyway the Zulu Nation isn't about chapters and meetings but more a state of mind." See McCoy.

the late 20th century—and you, the everyday listener, can also be a renegade. While the premise echoed Bambaataa's earlier missives of self-empowerment as the key to greater social unity, "Renegades of Funk" injected a palpable sense of urgency. As Bambaataa declared in his opening lines, "No matter how hard you try, you can't stop us *now*."[83] More ominously, the song transmitted anxieties about an ever-present threat of apocalypse, a warning that was entirely timely in 1983. Most notable is how the song brought Black radical politics to the fore of the Soulsonic Aesthetic, both in explicit and implicit ways.

The sound of "Renegades of Funk" makes the turn to an overtly defiant approach readily apparent. The overall style is spartan and with sharper edges. Kraftwerk-style keyboard melodies propelled the first two singles, but here Robie dials back, submitting his riffs as spiky flourishes to pounding electronic percussion. The backbone of the beat is cavernous, booming tom-tom hits accented by elongated snare reverberations. The TR-808's hi-hats relentlessly click away, producing a ticking time-bomb effect. The song's martial tone is further accented by the delivery of the lyrics, which register as more direct—and distinctly human. This is audible with many of Bambaataa's lines, which at times switch off the cyborg lilt that defined his previous performances. "Renegades of Funk" tacitly maintained a utopian drive given its emphasis on social change. Ultimately though, the musical delivery vehicle modulated from a feel-good appeal for change to a compulsory demand, if not declaration, that change was on its way, right then and there.

If the preceding songs suggested the free traversal of outer (and inner) space, the pressing concerns of "Renegades of Funk" are decidedly terrestrial. The galactic certainly

[83] Afrika Bambaataa & Soulsonic Force, "Renegades of Funk," Tommy Boy TB 839, 1983, 33 1/3 rpm single.

plays a role, as Bambaataa and the Soulsonic Force claim that they are "From a different solar system many many galaxies away."[84] Rather than trailblazing a way into space, the premise is that they halted their celestial movement so as to engage the problems of Earth. Lyrical references to "this atomic age," "Revelation," "violence" and "Doom's Day" all testify to brewing upheaval.[85] The underlying anxiety is a blend of apocalyptic Christian belief and renewed fears about nuclear war. At first the "atomic age" reference registers as an odd allusion given that it ordinarily denotes the era of nuclear technology (and destruction) beginning in the 1940s.[86] This claim had a contemporary reference point in Ronald Reagan's recent announcement of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), an advanced missile system designed to shield the United States from attacks by Soviet nuclear weapons.[87] One way of understanding the martial turn of "Renegades of Funk" then, is that it tapped into a larger current of concerns about militarization and apocalyptic potential at a global, if not celestial, scale.

It is not clear that nuclear conflict was the sole threat that alarmed Bambaataa. His invocation of the Book of Revelation, a Christian prophecy that vividly catalogs the horrors of the end of the world, suggests "this atomic age" might also be a referent for meltdown brought on by humankind's combined ills. As critic Gary Jardim remarked about Bambaataa's rhetoric, "His attempt to cut a wide swath, from Shakespeare and Tom Paine to crime and nuclear war, comes like a quasi-mystical attack on the belly of the beast."[88] This critique attests to how Bambaataa synthesized disparate concerns, as

[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Bambaataa opens the track by flipping the order of his lyric: "Renegades of this atomic age / This atomic age for renegades."
[87] Reagan announced the plan, which the media quickly dubbed "Star Wars," on March 23, 1983.
[88] Jardim critiques Bambaataa's work as scattershot social analysis, arguing that "Because the class contradictions of the modern underworld are beyond his analytic reach, he falls back on the pacifism of the

well as the challenge of parsing their random assembly. What remained trenchant about his hyperbole was that in the early 1980s, revolution was desperately needed, particularly for those not in power. As the lyrics extol, historically renegades who effected change were "everyday people like you and me."[89] In addition to their social standing, such rebels were defined by "their own philosophies,"[90] different ways of thinking about the conditions of everyday life. Much like Bambaataa's scattershot rhetoric, the renegade philosophies required for the late 20th century also came off as a mix of the supernatural and science fiction, ranging from astrology to "god's creation" to technology.

As the lyrics offer a constellation of alternative philosophies to counter the calamity of the 1980s, the song also signals a commitment to Black radical politics. The most obvious marker is the title, which heralds the work as belonging to a musical and cultural heritage that, as Rickey Vincent argues, had Black liberation as a core concern. The connection is further forged in musical terms, specifically in the vocal interpolations of two soul and funk songs, "Message From a Black Man" (1969) by The Temptations and "Weya" (1973) by Manu Dibango. In the former case, "Renegades of Funk" opens with Bambaataa chanting the signature line, "No matter how hard you try, you can't stop us now," which in its original iteration was followed by the lyric, "Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud."[91] In the latter case, midway through "Renegades of Funk" the Soulsonic Force incorporates a set of rhymes that Dibango, a saxophonist from Cameroon, wrote in

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church." While I disagree that Bambaataa advocated religious passivity, the critique speaks to the chaotic quality of Bambaataa's diagnosis of the 20th century and the difficulties his work presents for critical interpretation. See Gary Jardim, "The Great Facilitator," *The Village Voice*, October 2, 1984, 63.

[89] Afrika Bambaataa & Soulsonic Force, "Renegades of Funk."

[90] Ibid.

[91] The Temptations quote James Brown's "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud," which Bambaataa has often credited with raising his musical and political awareness.

Douala, one of the many languages spoken in his native country.[92] The use of both lyrics is strategic. At a sonic level, "you can't stop us now" generates an impression of musical momentum. The lyric also opens a relay to a moment in American history in which the struggle for racial liberation was more vocal in the public sphere. In 1969, "Message From a Black Man" broadcast a radical announcement of racial self-determination. In turn, the "Weya" chant amplifies feelings of rhythm and movement, the vowel-rhymes effortlessly pushing the song along. The allusion to Cameroon affords "Renegades of Funk" a more obvious Afrocentric sensibility, linking the song to the anti-colonialist tenor of the late 1960s and a longer continuum of African-derived expression.

While the interpolations serve as overt markers of racial pride, their performances in 1983 cannily glossed more explicit political statements about race. Most noticeably, rather than recite the full lyric from The Temptations' song, Bambaataa leaves off the "Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud" kicker. This is not to suggest that the song blunts its Black radical edge, but rather modulates its inclusion for particular effect. After all, the lyrics specifically call out Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. As with the musical references, these figures are strategically deployed, positioned within a longer historical lineage of renegade struggle and civilizational change.[93] Though that effort reduces Black radical politics to two figureheads, the lyrics also assert a central status for

[92] The "Weya" riff calls to mind the use of a different Dibango song that topped the charts in 1983, Michael Jackson's "Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'" (1983). The conclusion of that song featured the "mama-say mama-sah ma-ma-coo-sah" chant from Dibango's hit from a decade earlier, "Soul Makossa" (1972).
[93]It is worth considering that Bambaataa did not name other Black leaders who he revered, specifically the Nation of Islam's Elijah Muhammad and Louis Farrakhan. At the time, the mainstream response to the group was polarized, as it faced charges of racial separatism and anti-Semitism. That Bambaataa did not include them as "mighty renegades" seems strategic. However, his notebooks indicate their influence on his thinking. See the handwritten entries, Afrika Bambaataa, "The Universal Zulu Nation Infinity Lessons on Books That Is a Must to Be Read with an Open Mind for Knowledge, Wisdom and Understanding, Facts for the Total Picture of the Truth!!!", "Teachings of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad", and "Education Is Key: Quotes of Minister Farrakhan", Afrika Bambaataa Archive, notebooks.

them and what they represent in impacting the "course of history." With this move, the song bolsters its lyrical message of the inevitability of social change and furthers the idea that Black freedom was indeed certain and necessary. Further, the inclusion of these radical figures in a longer continuum of change implicitly proposes a notion of solidarity, or at least a shared sense of struggle across time. This is all to say that as confrontational as the song's form and delivery may be, much like "Looking for the Perfect Beat," the song modulates so as to forge a wider coalition of adherents to Bambaataa's program of change, which itself was committed to Black liberation.

Covers

Along with a shift in musical approach, "Renegades of Funk" marked the introduction of an accompanying graphic design aesthetic. For Bambaataa, the sleeves served as another platform to address audiences. As he put it: "I used the album covers to send messages to people around the Earth."[94] In a literal sense, the comment describes how he would include extensive lists of artists who influenced him in addition to missives such as "peace, unity and love."[95] This approach was not only a matter of didactic text. In contrast to previous songs, which arrived in generic company sleeves, the third single made a spectacular visual announcement with its illustration of the Soulsonic Force smashing through a brick wall (fig. 6). Such artwork accented Bambaataa's musical proposals and furthered its own heroic notions of fantastic Black masculinity. In line with the claim that Bambaataa and his entourage were "from a different solar system many many galaxies away," the images graphically forged connections between the galactic and the terrestrial, the continent of Africa and the southeast Bronx, the fantastic and the

[94] Afrika Bambaataa and Alien Ness, interview by Jim Fricke.
[95] See the liner notes from Shango, *Shango Funk Theology*, Celluloid CELL 6100, 1984, 33 1/3.

lived. The subjects of these covers resembled funk and disco groups from the time periods, but where those troupes were usually depicted as spectacular explorers, Bambaataa's scenarios were decidedly more confrontational, perhaps owing to what may have been a stronger influence: comic book illustrations.[96] The results were Black superheroes, deities that walked the Earth. These may have appeared as the stuff of fantasy, but their execution should also be thought of as blueprints for new realities.

This approach to records sleeves was in part based on Bambaataa's appreciation for records as more than media for storing and playing music. Instead, they were also visually compelling objects that listeners pore over at length. This idea was an extension of his record buying habits, as album covers often served as his entrant points into new worlds of sound. He recounted the process of discovering Kraftwerk (fig. 7):

> I started hitting the areas of the Village and looking for obscure records, and I came across this album with these four guys on it, and I said to myself, "There's some weird-looking, robot-type of things." They almost looked like they were some Nazi type of thing, but I said, "Let me take this home, and see what's going on." When I heard that group, I said, "What is this? This is so funky … these are some bad-ass white boys!" Once I heard this Kraftwerk, I said, "I've got to buy all this stuff![97]

He told a similar account of stumbling on the Japanese electronic-pop trio Yellow Magic Orchestra: "I used to look for weird covers, I might have seen Yellow Magic Orchestra and thought, 'That's a weird lookin' cover, let me pick this up.' Then it was something called 'Firecracker,' I said, 'Hmm, I could play with this'."[98] (fig. 8) In both instances, Bambaataa describes how the covers initially piqued his interest and then hints at how he

[96] Bambaataa's record collection includes countless releases featuring costumed troupes from a host of genres in conjunction with fantasy worlds, unidentified flying objects, aliens and the like. See Afrika Bambaataa Archive, vinyl record collection, The Cornell Hip Hop Collection.
[97] Fricke and Ahearn, 310, 315.
[98] Broughton.

heard a resonance between the art and music. In turn, the visual impact of his releases perform similar work, amplifying the sorts of ideas and concerns that the music transmits.

While specific sounds inspired "Planet Rock," the visual circuits of album cover art also provide clues to a layer of influences on Bambaataa's aesthetic. For example, "Planet Rock" interpolated the melody from "The Mexican" by Babe Ruth. *First Base*, the 1972 album that included the song, features a painting by British artist Roger Dean that depicts a sci-fi underwater world (fig. 9).[99] The scene, a group of futuristic aquanauts playing baseball while surfing sharks, blends elements that are hallmarks of Bambaataa's visual aesthetic: fantastic environments that subtly resemble earth, militaristic figures, and a sense of playfulness. Further, Bambaataa's original plan for "Planet Rock" was to incorporate drums from Captain Sky's "Super Sporm," which was included on *The Adventures of Captain Sky* (1978) album (fig. 10). In addition to its sonic inspiration, the cover appears to have had an influence on Bambaataa's larger aesthetic sensibility. The focal point of the illustration, which was done by design studio The Committee, is a musical caped crusader, a Black superhero whose shield and mode of transportation are both gold vinyl records.[100] This figure provided a model for an array of champions that fronted Bambaataa's releases, as well as promotional materials for his DJ performances. For example, the centerpiece image of the flyer for his 1981 show at the T-Connection, a Bronx club, is a retrofuturistic Zulu Nation fighter riding a hero-sized vinyl record (fig. 11).[101] Also, a likeminded soldier, this time surfing while wielding a Zulu Nation shield,

[99] Roger Dean is best known for his fantastical landscapes that fronted albums by progressive rock groups such as Yes, Asia and Uriah Heep.
[100] *The Adventures of Captain Sky* credits the bassist Larry Kimpel with inspiring the art. The Committee appears to have been a design group who worked on a number of releases for AVI Records. See Captain Sky, *The Adventures of Captain Sky*, AVI Records AVI 6042, 1979, 33 1/3 rpm.
[101] Eddie Ed and Poo 2, "T-Connection, February 20, 1981," photocopy, Breakbeat Lenny Archive, 1980-2004, Series II: Flyers, box 4, The Cornell Hip Hop Collection.

appears on the flyer for a 1983 show at the Bronx River Center (fig. 12).[102] Both of these illustrations were drawn by Poo 2, a Bronx-based artist who collaborated with designer Eddie Ed under the Soul Brothers Flyer Productions name on a number of Zulu Nation handbills.[103] Bambaataa may not have drawn these actual images, but they are indicative of the larger ensemble of ideas that emerged under his leadership. While the sound of his reference points inflected his aesthetic with fantastic, imaginary qualities, their visuals made a similar contribution. In turn, the "messages" he delivered to listeners were not only musical or discursive arguments but also pictorial.

The art with perhaps the most direct impact fronted the "Renegades of Funk" single (fig. 6). The illustration, which apes the look of a comic book cover, features Bambaataa and the Soulsonic Force—Pow Wow, Mr. Biggs, and MC G.L.O.B.E.—smashing through a red brick wall. Amid a swirl of flying concrete and clouds of dust, the group remains resplendent in flamboyant outfits and resolute with facial expressions that vary from tight-lipped grimaces to a scowl.[104] Each performer embodies a different archetype of a soldier: musketeer (MC G.L.O.B.E.), barbarian (Bambaataa), centurion (Mr. Biggs), Native American warrior (Pow Wow). For listeners who had not seen Soulsonic Force perform, the cover introduced the group and its core look. As such, the cover provided a preparatory image for new listeners that reinforced the group's live

[102] Poo 2, "Bronx River Center, February 24, 1983," photocopy, Charlie Ahearn Hip-Hop Archive, Series I: Wild Style Materials (flyers, publicity materials), box 4, The Cornell Hip Hop Collection. Poo 2 also illustrated a series of Zulu Nation figures that mashed together stereotypes of African tribesman (spears, shields, leopard print tunics) and Bronx fashion (sneakers, afros, sleeveless A-shirts) (fig. 13-14).
[103] While Eddie Ed and Poo 2 played crucial roles in defining the visual aesthetic of early hip-hop, comprehensive histories, let alone biographies, of these artists have yet to be written. For more on the conventions of early hip-hop flyers, see Amanda Lalonde, "Buddy Esquire and the Early Hip Hop Flyer," *Popular Music* 33, no. 1 (2014): 19-38.
[104] "Renegades of Funk" was not the first hip-hop event or release to use the design. For example, the Harlem-based artist Aton E used a similar treatment to advertise the January 5, 1980 performance of The Cold Crush Brothers. See this flyer in Fricke and Ahearn, 159.

practices (and central musical pursuit) of enacting a fantasy of heroic, funky racial Blackness. With regard to the image's message, the depicted scenario immediately resonates with the song, both in terms of the confrontational musical approach and the repetitious lyrical invocations of "mighty renegades." The graphic percussive impact of the illustration, as pronounced by the explosive crash and crumble of bricks, matches the song's booming electronic drums. As the track elaborates the philosophical import of insurgent leaders, the cover asserts a complementary dimension of physical rebellion: these are Black heroes that take direct action in the pursuit of their cause. Such righteous bodily aggression has a kind of pictorial appeal that graphically engages listeners. Accordingly, the imagined violence of the visuals is a spectacular gateway into a different sort of fight, that is, the political and social conflicts that the lyrics of the song sought to address.

In this light, the choice to render the group in comic book style makes perfect sense, as many of the musical themes resonated with common themes of the comic narratives such as moral systems of good and evil, heroic efforts, and apocalyptic threats. In a formal sense, the merger of musical persona and comics might be traced to a design decision to enlist Bob Camp, an artist already versed in the medium. Camp worked for Marvel Comics in the early 1980s, penciling titles such as *Conan the Barbarian*, *G.I. Joe* and *Savage Tales*.[105] The "Renegades of Funk" art synthesized the conventions of a Marvel cover, appropriating elements such as the price box, Seal of Approval of the Comics Code Authority, and exclamatory caption box. The three-dimensional letters

[105] Camp, who is best known for helping develop *The Ren & Stimpy Show* cartoon, went on to draw space-themed covers for electro group Newcleus, including the albums *Jam on Revenge* (1984) and *Space Is the Place* (1985). The art team for "Renegades of Funk" also included Pete Friedrich (lettering), Overnight Type & Graphics, NY (typography), and Thi-Linh Le, who designed the Soulsonic Force logo.

emblazoned across the top take their cues from the tilting masthead of the *X-Men* book circa its redesign in 1968 (fig. 15).[106] Most importantly, the cover deployed a familiar design schema for its centerpiece, a group of heroes blasting through a barrier. At the time, the trope was most famously deployed by artists Gil Kane and Dave Cockrum for the first issue of *Giant-Size X-Men* (May 1975) to introduce a new cohort of the mutant superhero team (fig. 16).[107] This particular iteration of the device provides "Renegades of Funk" with a rich subtext stemming from the shifting racial landscape of the 1970s.[108] The Kane and Cockrum illustration depicts a new squad of heroes ripping through the fourth wall of the cover—and by extension the original X-Men team. With this explosive action, the cover made a statement about the racial politics of the time, as the new multicultural group comes to the forefront in a full array of color.[109] The original group, the members of which were all racially White, appear in the background in monochromatic shades of blue. The contrasting color scheme, in conjunction with the new group barreling directly toward readers, symbolically consigned the days of all-White casts of characters to the past and ushered in a coalition assembled for the here and now of 1975.[110]

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[106] See Arnold Drake and Jim Steranko, *X-Men* #50 (November 1968), the first issue of the series to use the new masthead, which was redesigned by Steranko.
[107] See Gil Kane, Dave Cockrum and Len Wein, *Giant Size X-Men* #1 (May 1975).
[108] The study of comics is still in its infancy. For a historical overview of how the medium has represented Black subjects, quite often via demeaning, racist caricatures, see Fredrik Strömberg's *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2003). Adilifu Nama's *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), looks more closely at how Black heroes were imagined during the 1970s, arguing that while comics often worked through implicitly (and explicitly) racist logics, they provided vital vehicles for young Black readers to envision new identities. Further, Nama claims that a host of characters and stories of the 1970s should be understood as expressions of the evolving social conditions and racial logics of America at that time.
[109] The new X-Men group included an African goddess (Storm), Apache warrior (Thunderbird), Canadian with animalistic traits (Wolverine), German teleporter (Nightcrawler), and Russian strongman (Colossus).
[110] This is not to suggest the comic was a trouble-free representation of diversity. Even as the comic lauded these characters, many of whom would become central to the Marvel universe, it capitalized on racial and

The "Renegades of Funk" artwork transmits a set of variations on this assertion. It is not for nothing that the cover depicts a quartet of young Black men. In line with the "No matter how hard you try / you can't stop us now" lyric, these heroes refuse to relent. Instead, they embody an unstoppable affirmation of Black pride and implacable drive for change. This stands in opposition to a confluence of forces directed toward the annihilation of Black subjects at that time—the onset of mass incarceration, the influx of crack cocaine in Black communities, and accompanying civic and political abandonment. More specifically, the artwork responded to Bambaataa's concern with how the Bronx was too often represented as a ravaged wasteland of abandoned buildings. With the cover, Bambaataa and his group disrupt those stereotypical images, figuratively smashing through the empty apartment tower vision and supplanting the hyperviolent narrative of young Black men with a funky, righteous representation of Black masculine strength.

Further, akin to the *Giant Size X-Men* cover, the "Renegades of Funk" cover offers an argument for an acknowledgement of diversity, albeit in a twisted way. The new X-Men comprised a working alliance of mutants with varied racial, ethnic and national lineages. Bambaataa's coalitional aspirations manifested in the appropriation of racial and ethnic markers via his group's costumes. The most glaring example was Pow Wow, who typically appeared in Native American-inspired outfits that included full headdresses.[111] The costuming is problematic to say the least given that the garb has

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ethnic stereotypes to flesh out their personalities. Even as the comic ostensibly celebrated diversity, it deployed essentializing markers of racial difference, often in unflattering ways.

[111] Robert Darrell Allen, who has performed as Pow Wow since the group's inception, explained that the persona derived from a childhood nickname: "My mother named me that when I was five or six years old. There was a cartoon back in the day called 'Pow Wow the Indian Boy'! He was a bad boy. I was always getting into trouble growing up. Even the schoolteachers called me Pow Wow!" See Pow Wow, interview by Troy L. Smith, 2003, *JayQuan Dot Com*, http://www.thafoundation.com/briver.htm. Allen refers to the *Adventures of Pow Wow* cartoon, which offered its own set of problematic stereotypes and representations of Native Americans in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

spiritual and honorific significance to a host of tribes. The record cover depicts the rest of the crew adopting cultural signifiers such as MC G.L.O.B.E brandishing what appears to be a dao, a traditional Chinese sabre, and Bambaataa wearing dimije, baggy pants that are part of Turkish folk costumes. In a sense, this image of the Soulsonic Force projects a bizarre version of ethnic diversity that simultaneously affirms a funky, liberating conception of Blackness and smacks of a troubling ease with cultural appropriation.

The "Renegades of Funk" cover depicted how this "force of another creation" would bulldoze a righteous path through the streets of America, and subsequent covers portrayed Bambaataa and his groups in cosmic environments. The illustration for the 1986 *Planet Rock—The Album*, by artist John Aquilino, features the Soulsonic Force as having ascended from the Earth, now hovering amid the constellations (fig. 17).[112] The group members still wear the outfits of their respective roles, but the costumes have adopted a more hawkish look what with a horned helmet, Yoruban staff, and gleaming chrome. At the center, Bambaataa zaps a vinyl disc, imbuing the flying object with the charge of electronic funk as suggested by his gesture, a hand signal he had adopted to signify funk. That saucer joined a fleet descending to the surface: UFOs containing alien electronic music sent to convert the masses. The image is a literal depiction of the "universal people" term, as in effect, the group members become celestial bodies projecting an unflinching light for all the people of Earth to look up to.[113] These figures were not altogether benevolent as evidenced by their stances and armored get-up, which at first seems discordant with the written messages Bambaataa offered on the back cover.

[112] Aquilino is also credited with the hand lettering. Monica Lynch, who later became president of Tommy Boy, oversaw the art. Steve Miglio did the layout and design.
[113] The art for "Bambaataa's Theme" (1986) by Steven Miglio, furthers this idea. The charcoal illustration depicts Bambaataa melding with the night sky. In effect, he has become a constellation unto itself.

He concludes a long list of acknowledgements with "peace on earth as it is in the heavens." This twist on a verse from the Gospel of Matthew reinforces Bambaataa's idea of the cosmos as representing a harmonious ideal, a peace that the people of Earth should strive for.[114] Along with the seeming efficacy of that statement, the accompanying visual representation connotes that generating such harmony planet-side is a kind of battle.

The design for *Planet Rock—The Album* (1986) mirrors an earlier work Aquilino painted for *Shango Funk Theology* (1984), an album by Shango, one of Bambaataa's side projects (fig. 18). That cover, the concept for which the liner notes credit to Bambaataa, has a similar arrangement of figures and gestures. Bambaataa radiates as an elemental force of fire and light looming over the scene. He is flanked by three beings, two of which are vaguely robotic given their metallic headgear and glowing visor, while the third fits the male hero archetype of a caped hero. In contrast to *Planet Rock—The Album*, these are not simply celestial beings but more literally gods who reside in the heavens. This is reinforced by the way in which the cover draws on Marvel comics. A reference point for the helmeted figure on the left, if not the cover concept itself, is an early appearance by Galactus, a universe-roving god whose hunger can only be sated by consuming the energy of entire planets. The cover for *Fantastic Four* #49 (April 1966), by artist Jack Kirby, shows the character hanging over the heroes, his hands emanating Earth-shattering beams (fig. 19).[115] With its allusion to Galactus, *Shango Funk Theology* invokes a world-ending threat, which is reinforced by the flames generated by Bambaataa's hands and a tidal wave cresting above the earth in the bottom right corner. As with other Bambaataa adaptations, this cover keeps the visual imagery of the comic

[114] Bambaataa adapts the Matthew 6:10 from the *New Testament*: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven."
[115] See Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, *Fantastic Four* #49 (April 1966).

book god but alters his destructive intent. The implication is that the members of Shango, which the cover describes as "Gods of Thunder," are not so much destroyers as they are ushering in a new, positive social order. As evidenced by the hooded god in the center, potentially a robot or cyborg, technology plays a pivotal role in this sweeping change. The beams of light that this figure emits do not seem to be razing the Earth, as would be the case in so many dystopian science fiction or comic narratives. Rather they energize the world. In mobilizing the threat of Armageddon for his own devices, Bambaataa's visual concepts buttress his overarching refrain of change.

Costumes

> We started painting our hands and faces and people went crazy. … We'd take boots, add fur to it, costumes with wings, capes and horns, lookin' like Vikings. I wanna be a sultan, a warlock, a funky roman.
>
> — Afrika Bambaataa, as quoted in *USA Today*[116]

During the early stage of their recording careers, the group members "from many many galaxies far away" landed in clubs across New York City, delivering messages of social change in person. The music and visuals primed listeners to imagine Black space travelers and the sensorial experiences of new worlds. Bambaataa and the Soulsonic Force enacted those fantasies in live performance.[117] In contrast to the more uniform, street wear-inspired apparel that other groups tended to wear in concert, the stage show for Bambaataa and his crew centered around a riot of spectacular costumes.[118] The get-

[116] David Patrick Stearns, "A streetwise culture that's wildly upbeat," *USA Today*, June 22, 1984, 2D.
[117] In a 1982 interview, Bambaataa claims the first show in full regalia would be: "At the Fun House on June 5th. I hope everybody will be ready by then." See Hager, "DJ Afrika Bambaataa: It's the Sure Shot."
[118] To be clear, Soulsonic Force was not the only early hip-hop group to perform in costume; its members were part of a generation of funk-influenced artists committed to putting on a display for audiences. Kidd Creole, who performed with Grandmaster Flash in the Furious Five, sums up the difference: "We especially liked the way Earth, Wind, and Fire dressed—we didn't want to be as wild and outrageous as them but we still wanted to have that kind of 'Yo, we dressin' up for the show' mentality." See Fricke and Ahearn, 209.

ups, of which the "Renegades of Funk" cover offered an illustrated preview, condensed an array of Bambaataa's influences, including his heroes in the funk genre, Downtown punk rockers, and the Bronx street gangs of the 1970s. Surprisingly, these outfits have been largely ignored if not outright mocked in writing about hip-hop fashion. For example, longtime hip-hop commentator Raquel Cepeda describes the look as "cowboys and spacemen and other fantasy figures left over from the disco and funk eras."[119] Cepeda's dismissal erases the fact that these fanciful outfits were intentionally fashioned after funk troupes as a means to amplify the spectacles of early hip-hop shows. They were designed to heighten the experience of the show and further the site of the club as a space of escape from the pressures of everyday life. More importantly, in the case of Bambaataa and his entourage, such costumes defied the prevailing images of young Black men, offering fantastic representations that existed within the very real space and time of the performance. Such Black superheroes were not simply the stuff of imagination. On the contrary, they literally walked the earth. The point was that this idea would transfer to everyday audience members. They too could become living, breathing heroes—and, by extension, propel "universal" people into a more just, peaceful future.

In their conception, the costumes were designed with two reasons in mind: 1) To make the group stand apart from other hip-hoppers, and 2) To set the party off. As Bambaataa stated prior to their unveiling: "We don't want to fall into a thing of copying

[119] Cepeda levels this comment as a means of highlighting a drastic shift in hip-hop fashion from the "left over" flair of the early days to the everyday street look that Run-DMC helped usher in. See Raquel Cepeda, "So Fresh and So Clean: Hip-Hop and Fashion," in *Definition: The Art and Design of Hip-Hop*, ed. Cey Adams with Bill Adler (New York: Collins Design, 2008), 160. For more on hip-hop fashion, see Robin M. Chandler and Nuri Chandler-Smith, "Flava in Ya Gear: Transgressive Politics and the Influence of Hip-Hop on Contemporary Fashion," in *Twentieth-Century American Fashion*, ed. Linda Welters and Patricia Cunningham (New York: Berg, 2005), 229-254; Elena Romero, *Free Stylin': How Hip-Hop Changed the Fashion Industry* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012); Edwin PHASE Sacasa and Alain KET Mariduena, *Shirt Kings: Pioneers of Hip-Hop Fashion* (Arsta, Sweden: Dokument Press, 2013).

other groups. We want to come from a whole different angle. We just want everybody to come, space out, have a good time, no violence, just get down and boogie."[120] The result was a squad of hip-hop soldiers with distinct personalities that looked as imposing as they did ludicrous. An undated black-and-white press photo shot by photographer George DuBose shows these personas (fig. 20).[121] In the foreground, Mr. Biggs occupies a Roman warrior role with a winged centurion helmet, cape, and matching set of cuffs, boots and shoulder mantle. His tights include the constellations, as an upside-down dipper hangs above his right knee. Pow Wow stands in the center wearing his signature Native American headdress and a pair of slim, futuristic-looking sunglasses. MC G.L.O.B.E. appears on the left in a unitard cut down to his navel. Blocky glasses and a cavalier hat trimmed with an ostrich plume topped his outfit, which likely would have been the most colorful so as to evoke a map of the world.[122] The leader, Bambaataa, stands on the right with a leaning pose and facial expression that effect an air of mild shock. His baggy pleather smock with horned shoulders included lengthy bead fringe that dangled to his feet. A helmet with spikes and prominent side horns rounds out the barbarian look. In conjunction with this press photo, a flyer for a 1983 performance shows the performers posing in the same costumes, but with minor changes (fig. 21).[123] The flyer includes a picture of the group's fifth member, DJ Jazzy Jay, whose outfit comprises a glittery one-piece jester suit with lightning bolts, shoulder pads, fringe and a matching floppy hat. In comparison to the wave of liveried electro groups that would

[120] Hager, "Afrika Bambaataa: It's the Sure Shot," 11.
[121] See Afrika Bambaataa Archive, publicity and ephemera. These were not the only costumes the group wore, but these outfits exemplified the image and aesthetic.
[122] Pow Wow states: "We wanted to identify our own selves. That's why everybody had their costumes." He also mentioned: "G.L.O.B.E. represented the map; he had a costume with all these colors." See Pow Wow, interview by Werner von Wallenrod, *wernervonwallenrod.blogspot.com*, March 15, 2010.
[123] See Afrika Bambaataa Archive, publicity and ephemera. The wardrobe changes included different sunglasses, tights, and in Bambaataa's case, the removal of the long, beaded fringe.

follow, the members of the Soulsonic Force let their freak flags fly in their respective ways.[124] This fashion aesthetic embodied the rich set of tensions that the group's music had already sonically announced: peace and menace, utopia and dystopia, the past and the future, hilarity and menace, individuality and solidarity. In a sense, the content and form of Bambaataa's work was yet again intertwined as his interwoven messages of world peace and global cataclysm were delivered via funky beings that were equal parts fun and spiked edges.

Though Bambaataa strove to distinguish his group from other hip-hop ensembles, his claims to originality, i.e. "We don't want to fall into a thing of copying other groups," has a certain irony. This is largely given how the Soulsonic Force wore its influences on its proverbial—and literal—sleeves, particularly Parliament-Funkadelic. Though Bambaataa eschewed the overtly erotic sides of George Clinton's costuming, he retained his hero's penchant for extravagant outfits replete with capes, space iconography, eyewear, sequins, fringe, feathers and leather. More directly, MC G.L.O.B.E.'s colorful, vaguely swashbuckling get-up bore a strong resemblance to one of the central characters in the P-Funk mythology, Sir Nose D'voidoffunk (fig. 2 and 12). Bambaataa, who frequently acknowledged P-Funk as a primary inspiration, saw this less as imitation, than as refraction, a new take on the traditions of funk. As he told an interviewer in 1984:

> When we started, a lot of rappers were wearing tuxedos, dressing and doing dance steps like The Temptations. We wanted to go the whole funk way, the wild stage shows, costumes, capes, painted faces and hair, and all that … We wanted to show people that hip-hop was a continuation of the funk George Clinton gave us.[125]

[124] The closest competitors included Tommy Boy groups Planet Patrol and The Jonzun Crew. Sunnyview group Newcleus took a similar approach. All of these troupes wore matching space-themed outfits.
[125] "Afrika Bambaataa," *Black Echoes*.

In addition to riffing on P-Funk's look, Bambaataa's performance aesthetic subtly referenced, perhaps unintentionally, the look of New York street gangs, particularly the popular biker fashions that proliferated in the early 1970s. Fringed sleeves harkened to outrageous P-Funk gear, but they also echoed the gang fashion of "flying cut sleeves" in which members would fringe the edges of their shirts and jackets.[126] The leather, chains and spiked cuffs incorporated into the Soulsonic Force attire scan as costume prop takes on street weaponry. Additionally, these fashion elements drew on the look of Downtown New York punk cultures that also had such a sizable impact on Bambaataa's musical thinking. Years later Bambaataa confirmed this hybrid style was part and parcel of his mission to forge a union between different audience demographics:

> I started having this vision that I've got to grab that black audience and white audience and bridge the gap. And that's when I started saying I'm going to take the Funk or what P-Funk and Sly and the Family Stone had, and I'm going to take the wild punk rock look.[127]

The logic was that blending disparate cultures might draw in members of their varied crowds. Within the wild atmosphere of a Soulsonic Force show, an affective solidarity among clubgoers might be lived. Regardless of how temporary those unions might be, the fact such opportunities could be encouraged was central to his plan for a better future.

For Bambaataa, the power of the costumes lay in how they blurred the lines between fantasy and social reality. The outlandishness, in all its seeming disconnect from the lived experience of New York and beyond in the 1980s, was a model designed to enable viewers and listeners to see, hear and feel their worlds differently. As with much

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[126] For more on street gang aesthetics see the documentaries *Rubble Kings* (Shan Nicholson, 2010) and *Flyin' Cut Sleeves* (Henry Chalfant, 1993). An even clearer connection between Bambaataa's costumery and street gang fashion can be seen in *Beat This! A Hip-Hop History* (Dick Fontaine, 1984), specifically a scene on the rooftops of the Bronx River Houses. As Bambaataa overlooks territory gangs once controlled, he wears a variation of his performance outfit, which includes black leather, spikes and fringed sleeves.
[127] Afrika Bambaataa and Alien Ness, interview by Jim Fricke.

of Bambaataa's efforts, this idea stemmed from personal experience. When asked about his influences, Bambaataa remarked on the sway they exerted on his imagination:

> When he [Sly Stone] began I used to think he was crazy. The way he dressed, but then I got into it. George Clinton too. I fell for all the illusions he enacted on stage in the beginning. I think when people started believing what he was doing on stage, he got nervous. Frightened by his own power.[128]

For Bambaataa, falling for the stage chimera was a powerful moment that impacted his thinking about the implications of his creative endeavors. Stage spectacles could be about more than the pragmatic necessity of giving audiences a bang for their bucks. Rather, the stage illusions might also be mobilized to foster new ways of thinking about everyday life, social change, and racial Blackness. It is not so much that Bambaataa expected listeners to attend a show and then dress up like a viking. Rather, his spectacular aesthetic was much more about forging space for listeners to play with the idea of who they might be—and become—both as individuals and in collective settings. As he told a writer for *USA Today*: "Everybody wants to be themselves, but they also want to get an escape, to be somebody else."[129] With the costumes, Bambaataa modeled a means for everyday audience members to experiment with seemingly impossible versions of themselves and to imagine themselves in alliances that might have seemed just as improbable. After all, on its costumed face, the Soulsonic Force was an unlikely assembly of fictionalized warriors that never could have coexisted. His approach looked to reveal a potential that lay in embracing the designs of other cultures. Again, that sort of appropriation was certainly not without its pitfalls, as evidenced by the offensive assumption of Native American ceremonial garb. Despite this problematic aspect, Bambaataa observed this

[128] McCoy.
[129] Stearns.

power of illusion not as something to shirk away from, but rather to take up and deploy as far and as wide as possible, from New York to the galaxy.

Just as Bambaataa calibrated this approach to bridge hip-hop and punk rock crowds, his mode (and message) did so by implicitly speaking back to the stultifying images of Black youth that dominated media coverage of the Bronx. Bambaataa countered the latently racist images of Black communities as defined primarily by the seductive tropes of predator and prey, as drug users and hellraisers prone toward violence. This is not to claim that Bambaataa denied the persistence of gang tendencies or downplayed conditions of poverty, drug use and violence. Rather, he wanted to affirm the diversity, camaraderie and aspirations that simultaneously persisted in the Bronx. He did so by turning to the recent past as a resource, tapping the rich vein of disruptive looks and practices of the funk genre. His retrofitting of the P-Funk aesthetic entailed a subsequent extension of the Black liberation sensibilities that propelled Clinton's sprawling project. Then, in taking his troupe of Black heroes into the clubs, particularly those across the Bronx and Harlem, Bambaataa, in a sense, naturalized their personas and powers. They crossed over from the cosmic realms of the imaginative to become actual fixtures, lived possibilities for Black heroism amid the landscapes of New York.

"One big ball of confusion"

> But the idea of hip-hop is not the streets, not the ghetto, not burned-out buildings. … The idea is like Japanese cartoons and high-tech motorcycles. It's a fantasy world, a cartoon world. The dancers are like superheroes. It's not real. It's super-real.
>
> — Michael Holman, as quoted in *USA Today*[130]

[130] Stearns.

In 1984, hip-hop impresario Michael Holman opined about a purported disconnect between hip-hop and the Bronx environments where it originated. In one sense, his catchphrases about the culture's defining traits—fantasy, cartoon, high-tech, superheroes—describe Bambaataa's music and look. His last claim that hip-hop was "super-real," could not be more accurate when it came to the Soulsonic Aesthetic, but not in the way he intended. The "super-" prefix connoted the idea that hip-hop was beyond or above everyday life, but for Bambaataa those super-qualities were inextricably bound up with the lived experiences of his groups and their Earth-bound audiences. His musical rhetoric about cosmic travel and visual displays of outlandish figures were entirely animated by concerns about terrestrial conditions, particularly those associated with race. If anything, Bambaataa sought to further the connections between outer space and the street as a means to think and feel unrealized modes of social change and ultimately liberation. The fantasies he enacted were designed to spill over to the lived places and spaces of the club, concert halls, parks and homes of his followers.

Holman's comment, however enthusiastic about hip-hop, was symptomatic of a damning cultural trend that defined America in the 1980s, what historian Manning Marable described as "the paradox of integration." That is, the growing acceptance and celebration of Black cultural expressions twinned with a coordinated disinvestment and abandonment of Black communities.[131] Holman's statement not so subtly disavows the circumstances that surrounded the very music he championed. This peculiar cultural dynamic rendered Bambaataa's home community of the Bronx in its own sort of double bind. The area was at once ignored in real social and political terms, and a conspicuous symbol wielded by popular media outlets of exotic, veritable alien pockets of Black life

[131] Marable, 185-186, 213.

framed as entirely plagued by crime, drugs and violence. Bambaataa responded by becoming a kind of futuristic human synthesizer, marshaling a host of resources, influences and personal experiences to generate electronic, funk-derived representations of racial Blackness. Much like his musical forebears, his creative expressions intervened against the racist categories of how Black subjects ought to look and sound. From within the crucible of forced insularity, Bambaataa worked through an aesthetic that comprised multivalent expressions of expansion and openness. The Soulsonic moniker suggested that soul—both as an individual's spirit and the musical genre—might move at the speed of sound. The notion envisioned multidirectional transportation through the internal pathways of the psyche and an outward spread, the opening of one's soul to the world. In a more physical sense, the Soulsonic Aesthetic propelled a desire for greater lived mobility for Bambaataa and his adherents, if not all residents of the Bronx. Finally, Bambaataa's works, which he and his collaborators intended to forge bonds between disparate audiences, were oriented to have universal appeal. He sought to affirm not just communities of Black and Latino listeners, but rather he championed a coalition among all communities, human and potentially alien alike.

Bambaataa blazed aural and visual routes to and from the cosmos, but the trajectory of his creative work reflects a substantial buffeting by terrestrial concerns; his utopian aspirations for the boundless were ever bounded by the gravity of life on earth. His dystopian prophecies may have registered as zealous inflation, but those exhortations transmitted an array of real frustration, anger and anxiety about the early 1980s, especially the persistence of racial inequalities and injustice. As fun, funky, and futuristic as his recordings and performances may have been through the decade, they were

accompanied by an ever-growing paranoia about a current-day resurgence of White supremacist groups and geopolitical clashes.[132] Even the utopian site of outer space, the heavens where peace had ostensibly been reached, bristled with danger. As he exclaimed to *Melody Maker*: "To me it's just one big ball of confusion. I reckon the only way the whole planet would pull together is if somebody from outer space threaten us. Then we will really see star wars!"[133] The multiplicity of the "big ball of confusion" speaks to the thick ensemble of tensions that undergird the Soulsonic Aesthetic.[134] Perhaps such expressions of entanglement are where the radicality of Bambaataa's work ultimately lie. In effect, the lattice of conflicts and dreams, pressures and aspirations, peace shadowed by violence, constituted an explosive grammar, a language that in all its fantasy and hyperbole continues to transmit some true sense of the catastrophe that so many people lived through in the early years of the 1980s.

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[132] In 1984 Bambaataa collaborated with John Lydon, formerly of the Sex Pistols, on "World Destruction." The song fused the ever-present specter of race with other divisions such as nationality, class and religion, and larger geopolitical alliances that would potentially lead to nuclear meltdown. He furthered this scenario in 1988, claiming: "Blacks may get tired of being endlessly slaughtered and may start killing off whites in the rest of Africa, where blacks are in power. Then the racists in England, France and Germany won't stand for that, they'll start attacking black people in the streets, blacks in America will go crazy, and it'll be the end. … Others will have to retaliate, and it'll be world nuclear war." See Simon Witter, "Afrika Corps," *New Musical Express*, February 27, 1988, 16. He expressed this argument in musical terms with a song entitled "World Racial War," which appeared on Afrika Bambaataa and Family's 1988 album, *The Light*. His notebooks contain handwritten lyrics for the song, which reference horror movies (*The Omen*, *Rosemary's Baby*), the "New World Order," leaders from Ronald Reagan to Muammar Gadaffi, and murderous police officers. See Afrika Bambaataa Archive, notebooks. He continued these claims two years later, claiming: "It's like there's a lot of white supremacists coming back right now like the Ku Klux Klan in America and those National Front skinheads in Europe. There's some serious sickness we got to get rid of in this world." See Jay Strongman, "The Afrika Bambaataa Interview," *Soul Underground* (1990): 30, Afrika Bambaataa Archive, publicity and ephemera, The Cornell Hip Hop Collection.

[133] Pye, "Zulu Dawn."

[134] As with many of Bambaataa's statements, this line harkened to the Black musical past, as it referenced "Ball of Confusion (That's What the World Is Today)," a hit single by The Temptations from 1970.

Chapter 2
Sound Designs: Herbie Hancock, Blackness and the Paradox of Popular Media

In August 1983, Herbie Hancock's "Rockit" shot into the top five on the dance charts, just two months after its release.[1] Amid growing buzz from trade publications about the subsequent full-length record, *Future Shock*, Columbia Records ran a full-page advertisement in *Billboard* suggesting Hancock's latest music would have an explosive impact (fig. 22).[2] The marketing tagline claimed, "The Future Will Never Be The Same," an assertion that was visualized as a bolt of musical energy blasting apart a black-and-white photograph of the Earth. Shards of the globe scattered over a tilted backdrop of clouds that harkened to the mushrooming aftermath of an atomic detonation. A collage aesthetic along with a purple color scheme added layers of ambiguity, portending an uncertain, fractured future. The branding of an imminent sonic "shock" flirted with a spate of cultural excitement and anxiety surrounding technologies of the late twentieth century, particularly nuclear proliferation and rapid developments in digital computing. As such, the graphic hyperbole of the ad implies how record executives intended Hancock's record to be heard: as something new, electrified, high tech—and alarming.

The star musician is not pictured but instead referenced in the fine print of the ad copy. At first the omission scans as curious given that Hancock was one of the most well-known figures in jazz. Such visible obfuscation, if not erasure, was also at work in a promotional vehicle with a much higher profile, the music video for "Rockit," which was in heavy rotation on MTV. It seems there was an unspoken concern surrounding Hancock's new work having to do with race, as he had accepted a minor role in his first

[1] See "*Billboard* Dance/Disco Top 80," *Billboard*, August 13, 1983, 27, and "*Billboard*'s Top Album Picks," *Billboard*, August 20, 1983, 60.
[2] The ad ran in the opening pages of the August 13 issue. See *Billboard*, August 13, 1983, 5.

video out of concern the network would not air a production featuring a Black performer.[3] As journalist Bill Adler said of the video: "It's a way of programming black music to white youth without any scary black people in it."[4] In this light, the print ad conveys some of the disturbing dynamics surrounding Blackness by what it does not display. Where the marketing traffics in a nebulous notion of technological-induced change—a sensibility Hancock was also invested in—his minimal presence in the video helps reveal the longevity of existing historical traditions into that changing future, namely anti-Black inclinations and respondent Black cultural expressions.

These events, both in terms of the surrounding circumstances and the ways Hancock creatively negotiated them, point to how visibility in popular media remained a minefield for many Black performers in the late twentieth century. As Manning Marable has identified, this period would come to be defined by a "modern racial paradox."[5] Concurrent with how many Black communities faced economic disinvestment from all levels of government, the systematic withering of laws safeguarding civil rights, and increasingly punitive modes of "law-and-order" repression, mainstream White America increasingly embraced Black cultural productions.[6] A high-profile celebrity such as Hancock was especially alluring as his success could be easily construed as signaling the achievement of racial equality and economic prosperity for all citizens—a fantasy that could not have been further from the spiraling realities of life for many Black Americans.

When Hancock's *Future Shock* arrived, this paradoxical configuration was on the cusp of realization, particularly when it came to the dynamic of celebrating Black music,

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[3] See Hancock, 241-242.
[4] Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum, *I Want My MTV: The Uncensored Story of the Music Video Revolution* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 170.
[5] Marable, 183-188, 213.
[6] Ibid.

acting, art and athletic exploits. To put this in perspective, *The Cosby Show* would not debut until September 1984, Oprah Winfrey's show did not gain national syndication until September 1986, and Michael Jordan's back-to-back wins at the NBA Slam Dunk Contest would not begin until a year later. In 1983, exclusion by race was still a putative media practice, even at a seemingly transgressive cable channel on the rise such as MTV, which maintained programming strategies that uniformly snubbed Black performers.[7] This was not insignificant as videos were rapidly becoming crucial promotional vehicles to drive record sales.[8] Cracks had formed in the MTV barrier by the time the "Rockit" video debuted, primarily from pressure to air the video for Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean" earlier that year. But given how "Rockit" sidelines Hancock's presence and makes a crowd of dismembered robots its stars, the policy had a clear impact. As such, the workings of the video and its aftermath, which included a surge in Hancock's popularity, attest to how the onset of the racial paradox was navigated by Black performers.

In this chapter, I argue that Hancock's works evidence pragmatic, and at times subtle, creative approaches to the racial strictures of American popular media of the early 1980s. In their musical and associated audiovisual forms, "Rockit" and *Future Shock* share nuanced, often surreptitious transmissions about life and attitudes on both sides of the Black-White color line. At a fundamental level, the electro sound design of the album, especially "Rockit," offered an influential affirmation for the burgeoning Black

[7] Hancock has danced on this issue at times. As he told *Rolling Stone*, "I have no proof that MTV had a racist policy, but I didn't want to take any chances." Writer Nelson George reported the situation was so blatant the Black Music Association considered seeking legal remedies from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). See David Fricke, "Herbie can't dance," *Rolling Stone*, October 23, 1984, 45; and Nelson George, "BMA Taking Look at 'Exclusion'," *Billboard*, October 29, 1983, 3.

[8] The year "Rockit" debuted was already being regarded as a watershed for the medium. As the film critic for the *Los Angeles Times* claimed in his review of 1983: "This was the year music video came of age." See Patrick Goldstein, "Rock Videos—A Brave Beginning," *Los Angeles Times*, December 25, 1983, N63.

and Latino youth culture of hip-hop.[9] Alongside that validation, the video and the famed televised Grammy performance of the song manifested alarming concerns about how race was represented and understood in mainstream entertainment. Further, the titular future shock concept advanced a web of excitements and anxieties about the trajectories of everyday life in the face of environmental calamity and ongoing racial oppression. This is not to argue that Hancock's works were only about race. They also articulated his beliefs in the associated possibilities of music and technology, which he framed in terms of discovery and liberation. As he put it: "Electro-funk opens up great freedom of sound, allows you to improvise with sound like you improvise with notes in jazz."[10] As my analysis shows, Hancock's maneuvers disturbed representational confines that confronted Black artists while, at times, also played into the effacement of Black bodies. In effect, Hancock evinced a profound tension between aspirations for unfettered exploration and the multifarious realities of epistemic racial violence. Analysis of his productions allows for a thicker cognizance of how such pressures manifested from persistent anti-Black tendencies and held implications for Black visibility at that historical juncture.

The defining sonic qualities of Hancock's audiovisual creations in this era—cyborg tones, textures and beats—stemmed from his enthusiasm for electronics, especially a growing spate of commercially available synthesizers. With that in mind, my analysis builds on the logic of synthesis around which such devices are designed, that is, generating sound through the electronic combination of pitch, timbre and loudness. More

[9] As one music writer heard it: "Traditionalists on the scene have already choked on the output of Tommy Boy electros like Afrika Bambaataa, Planet Patrol and the Jonzun Crew, but they've been able to convince themselves that the new movement, if ignored long enough, will eventually go away of its own accord. Now that Hancock—a crucial, highly respected jazz artist and a veritable founding father of jazz-funk—has added his own weight and talent to the music, such ostrich-like sticking of heads into the sand just won't cut it." See Chris May, "Programmed for Change," *Black Music & Jazz Review*, August 1983, 14.
[10] May, "Programmed for Change," 15.

specifically, my theoretical lens derives from the concept of *additive synthesis*, in which sounds are produced and manipulated by multiplying and fusing those elements. This process, which characterizes the workings of digital synthesizers, contrasts with the procedure of *subtractive synthesis* by which older analog synthesizers shape sounds by filtering out undesirable sonic features.[11] I make this delineation in part given how Hancock was increasingly turning toward digital and computer instruments.[12] At the conceptual level, additive synthesis is a productive lens for observing not only his approach to creating music and what he heard as its generative potentials, but also how his sounds and their accompanying visuals evince an array of ideas and concerns in the early 1980s. As I hear and see them, Hancock's productions can be understood as moving toward a mode of sound design that at a fundamental level retained, rather than eliminated, constituent components, even if objectionable or unwanted. This additive schema mirrors the way his works preserved and refracted claims and expressions about the status of racial Blackness and its contemporary circumstances.[13]

In practice, Hancock heard sound synthesis as a vehicle for expressive discovery, which by the 1980s had enabled him to survey and integrate a core set of interests in

[11] I acknowledge these are broad definitions of operations that are far more technical. My initial thinking about subtractive and additive synthesis was influenced by explanations in a book that accompanied *Rockschool*, a children's show Hancock hosted for PBS in the late 1980s. As the text briefly describes, "The fundamental difference between an analog and a digital synth is that instead of applying all manner of electronic circuitry to a basic waveshape in order to remove unwanted portions, a digital synth simply multiplies sine waves together." See *Rockschool 2: Electronics, Keyboards & Vocals*, ed. Chris Lent (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 98. For more in-depth technical descriptions, see Sam McGuire and Nathan van der Rest, *The Musical Art of Synthesis* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2016).

[12] The equipment notes for *Future Shock* list a slew of instruments with different technologies for creating sound, including electric keyboards, digital samplers, and both digital and analog synthesizers. Hancock would continue to employ a hybrid set-up, but he went on to incorporate more digital synthesizers and computers. As an aside, this coincided with the industry's adoption of MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) in 1983, a standard that streamlined the ways digital instruments could be integrated.

[13] In this light, my working concept of synthesis serves as a complement to Fred Moten's theorization of ensemble, specifically in its interpretive capacities and analytical attentions.

technology, sound, outer space, and a continuum of Black music. This was initially aided by his decision to fully engage electronic instruments in the early 1970s. As he reflected:

> Getting into synthesizers was a natural evolution for me, not only because I'm fascinated by the possibilities of creating new sounds and colors, but because I have a streak in me that loves electronics, which is a carryover from when I wanted to be an engineer. I love gadgets and I love buttons, and they help me not only to make notes and harmonies and rhythms, but to be able to create, from scratch, the very *sound* that's gonna produce these notes.[14]

Hancock's statement points to the range of exploration that electronic instruments made possible, as they opened unheard palettes of tones, i.e. "colors," and textures.[15] He was, in a sense, mobilizing new technologies to perform a musical mode of science fiction, traversing futuristic worlds of sound. This was not lost on some critics, who heard Hancock's "video game noise" in line with another pioneering jazz musician who had picked up electric keyboards to ride the musical spaceways, Sun Ra.[16] Synthesizers were also central to Hancock's engagements with popular genres, particularly funk and R&B, which helped him connect with broader audiences while also serving to directly affirm Black musical traditions.[17] As I show in this chapter, Hancock's *Future Shock* carried on in the energetic and experimental trajectories of these earlier productions, yet the

[14] Hancock did not record with a synthesizer until the *Head Hunters* album in 1973, but he had long been interested in electronic sounds. He credits trumpeter Donald Byrd and drummer Tony Williams for pushing him to think about making music with a wider tonal palette in the early 1960s, as they introduced him to electroacoustic and musique concrète works that may not have used synthesizers but were "of that nature." As he notes, he was already inclined toward gadgetry given his engineering training at Grinnell College, which itself was an extension of childhood tinkering with mechanical things. See Conrad Silvert, "Herbie Hancock: Revamping the Past, Creating the Future," *Down Beat*, September 8, 1977, 17.

[15] Bob Gluck details the evolution of Hancock's approach to electronics as sound design instruments, arguing he "was one of a handful of pianists who recognized that the sonic of possibilities of the electric piano, and then synthesizers, could open new doors." See Bob Gluck, *You'll Know When You Get There: Herbie Hancock and the Mwandishi Band* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 70-75.

[16] See Howard Mandel, "Herbie Hancock's *Future Shock*," *Down Beat*, April 1984, 60.

[17] Hancock declared synthesizers "a perfect compliment [sic] to the kind of music I was into anyhow," as they fit his "far out" sound and helped him get bookings at venues alongside rock acts. See Bryce Robbley and Doug Lynner, "Herbie Hancock Interview," *Synapse Magazine*, May/June 1977, 23.

syntheses that emerged in 1983 were shot through with traces of longstanding American cultural anxieties, particularly those surrounding racial Blackness.

Akin to the mechanisms of the robots in the "Rockit" video, there are a host of moving parts to my analysis. Rather than follow their hodgepodge assembly, the components of this chapter are constructed around three sections. In the first, I observe Hancock's intertwined approaches to musical statements about racial Blackness and new music technologies, particularly during the 1970s in the lead-up to *Future Shock*. In the second, I assess the primary iterations of "Rockit," including the dynamics of the song, the peculiar array of violence that pervades its music video, and the complexities of Hancock's show during the Grammy Awards in 1984. In the concluding section, rather than try to survey the entire *Future Shock* album, I analyze the relationships between the various refractions of its title. Doing so reveals a network of contradictory inclinations toward visual and aural representations of the Black subject endemic to the early 1980s.

Musical Crossings Through Race, Space and Earth

As evidenced by his public statements, Hancock's relationship with Black radical politics can be described as equivocal, if not ambivalent at times. Though he has not shied away from speaking about race relations, it often seems that his preferred approach is to let the music do the talking. When asked about "black pride" in 1970, he responded: "My expression of it may not be as overt as some people, but I certainly feel it. I'm much more vocal about it, though without being the type of guy that's on a soapbox."[18] Over the course of his long career, he has directed a handful of projects that explicitly address Black political concerns. For example, his post-bop exegesis of the tensions that mark the

[18] Dan Strongin, "Herbie Hancock," *Jazz & Pop*, October 1970, 32.

experience of Black oppression on *The Prisoner* (1969) or his soundtrack for *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (Ivan Dixon, 1973), a cinematic lightning rod that pilloried the Civil Rights Movement in its depictions of a Black insurgency in Chicago. As a sideman, Hancock has played on a host of recordings aligned with Black Power and Afrocentrism, two of the more obvious being saxophonist Joe Henderson's *Power to the People* (1969) and Kuumba-Toudie Heath's *Kawaida* (1970), the latter of which the poet Amiri Baraka characterized at the time as a fitting accompaniment to the "heaviest" Black nationalist thought.[19] Of such endeavors, Hancock tended to proffer guarded comments on their avowed statements toward racial liberation. When asked about *Kawaida*, he replied:

> I was just playing what I was told to play. But I was never into what those guys were into. They are what was termed Black Awareness disciples and the only thing I've ever done in that direction is take on a Swahili name—Mwandishi, which means 'composer'. Now don't get me wrong, I'm not against their beliefs but I just don't happen to share them.[20]

This is not to suggest that Hancock has eschewed concerns that have been central to the long struggle for Black freedom, such as unity and self-determination or the persistence of racial violence and injustice. Instead, the matter seems to be one of perspective and address, as he has long maintained that racism should not be one's primary focal point nor should it dictate one's life and work.[21] That being said, much of Hancock's music, particularly his passages through Afrocentric-tinged collective improvisation and Black funk and soul modes during the 1970s, can be understood to evince deep-seated, if not radical, commitments to Black life, politics, and expressions.

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[19] See Baraka's liner notes in Kuumba-Toudie Heath, *Kawaida*, O'Be Records OB-301, 1970, 33 1/3 rpm.
[20] See John Abbey, "Herbie Hancock: 'Ancock An' the 'Ead 'Unters," *Blues & Soul*, August 1976, http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/herbie-hancock-ancock-an-the-ead-unters-.
[21] Hancock recounts racist incidents in his memoir, but he also writes, "Some black people look for racism, but I made a point of *not* looking for it, because looking for it feeds a victim mentality, which doesn't help anyone." See Hancock, *Possibilities*, 14.

Hancock's routes through popular modes of Black music in the lead-up to the 1980s, which were pronounced by his incorporation of their rhythmic logics and growing reliance on electronic instrumentation, largely fall into two periods. His work with his Mwandishi band in the early 1970s—fluid inventions that plumbed the complexities of rhythm and tone—demonstrated an experimental, ensemble approach to making music. By 1973, those spontaneous explorations gave way to more controlled engagements with the stripped-down rhythms of funk, soul, and, eventually disco, in addition to the full pursuit of generating music with electronics. Though purist critics regarded these developments as deleterious turns away from jazz, Hancock was passionately concerned with how such popular forms might be fused with jazz improvisation, both to explore new expressive territory and modes, but to also bridge outward toward wider, more diverse audiences.[22]

With the Mwandishi group, Hancock signaled investments in the Afro-diasporic musical continuum, in part by probing the potentials of repetition. This approach was announced by the group's initial recorded statement, "Ostinato (Suite for Angela)" (1970).[23] For Hancock's ensemble, recurrence liberated spaces for dense, syncopated rhythms and communal interaction, core features of Black musical traditions.[24] The track was also bonded with a note of solidarity for Angela Y. Davis, the Black revolutionary activist who had been the subject of a sensational FBI hunt and imprisonment during the

[22] As he explained to *Melody Maker* in 1976, he was on a mission to stoke a different sense of sociality with audiences who then might connect with jazz: "There are people out there listening to the music. And in some way I'm trying to reach them so that we can have some common ground. … Then when we've got that common ground, maybe we can turn each other on to a little somethin' extra. What I'd most like to do is provide the audience with a window so that they can see some of the other things that I can do." See Steve Lake, "Soul Food: Headhunter's conversion," *Melody Maker*, July 24, 1976, 18.
[23] Ostinato, which in classical terms refers to a phrase that repeats, is a foundational feature of pop music, taking the form of riffs, vamps and grooves.
[24] My characterization draws on Gluck's detailed analysis of the song. See Gluck, 90-101.

recordings. The message of Black comradeship extended past Davis to a broader cultural affinity. Among the many deft arguments jazz historian Bob Gluck develops about the Mwandishi group, he explains, "The band was proudly black identified … exemplified by its racial composition, use of Swahili names, wearing of dashikis, and black musical signifiers."[25] As the project developed, that Afrocentric sensibility merged with sonic impressions of the cosmic, which blossomed with the inclusion of early synthesizers played by Patrick Gleeson starting with *Crossings* in 1972.[26] As Hancock put it, the band's character expanded from "spaced-out freedom" to an "intergalactic palette," as the electronic sounds pushed the envelope of known tones.[27] These overlapping explorations of Afrocentricity and the celestial were elaborated in visual terms on Hancock's album covers from the time. For example, the surrealist ancient-futurism of Robert Springett's painting for *Sextant* (1973) depicting ceremonial dancers beneath a fiery sky and enormous crescent moon, a pyramid, and celestial animals (fig. 23).[28] Though Hancock maintained the Mwandishi project for only a few years, this was an intensely fruitful period that established a foundation of grooves, racial affirmation and astral electronics for his work in the following decade.

[25] Gluck notes this affirmation continued even with the addition of Patrick Gleeson, a White synthesizer player. See Gluck, 25. Gleeson recounted his integration was not smooth at first but "this wonderful thing gradually happened, you know, that was we bonded." See Steven F. Pond, *Head Hunters: The Making of Jazz's First Platinum Album* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 105.
[26] Gleeson began by overdubbing synthesizers to recordings. Hancock was so excited about how electronics expanded the group's tonal palette that he decided to integrate a synthesizer player into a jazz ensemble, which was a first. Gluck discusses Gleeson's studio work on *Crossings* and the challenges resulting from his becoming a full member of Hancock's touring band. See Gluck, 110-115 and 125-139.
[27] Hancock, 146 and 177.
[28] Springett's paintings also appeared on Hancock's *Crossings* (1972) and *Thrust* (1974) albums.

In the interim, Hancock embarked on explorations of pop forms, starting with funk inspired by the likes of James Brown and Sly and Family Stone.[29] The shift was spurred in part by a gig the Mwandishi band shared with the R&B group The Pointer Sisters in 1973.[30] As Hancock described, the crowd reaction to the sisters' infectious stage energy put the serious vibe surrounding his group into sharp relief. The subsequent gamble to play music that was catchier and fun, yet still thick with polyrhythms and new electronic tone colors, was marked by the release of *Head Hunters* (1973) later that year. Hancock rode this venture to new audiences, largely on the deliciously repetitive vamp of its opener, "Chameleon" (1973). After soaking up Gleeson's knowledge of electronics, Hancock picked them up, as demonstrated by his use of Arp synthesizers for the distinctive bassline and bleepy, squealing excursion that was the first of two keyboard solos. Between its instantly hummable riffs, funky horn tags and hip-shaking drumbreaks, "Chameleon" was essentially an extended dance track. Jazz historian Steven Pond clarifies that while Hancock intended to make a straightforward funk record, the results comprised "something else" in the ways the musicians struck a nuanced balance between grooves, improvisation, and ever-shifting metric nods to a wide variety of Afro-diasporic rhythmic patterns.[31] As Pond also argues, in drawing on funk, *Head Hunters* sounded a "deepening commitment to enhancing and valorizing black identity in the United

[29] Hancock claimed that Brown's "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag" (1965) broke him out of being a "jazz snob" and called Sly Stone's "Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin)" (1969) the "funkiest thing I ever heard." See Josef Woodard, "The Herbie Hancock Interview," *Down Beat*, June 1988, 17.
[30] At this point, Hancock was also supporting the Mwandishi project largely out of his own pocket, which as he saw it, was becoming unsustainable given the size of the ensemble and the rising costs of equipment and touring. Hancock details his side of this situation in his memoir. See Hancock, 167-170.
[31] Pond's examination of *Head Hunters* offers a wealth of insight into how the music is interwoven with ideas about racial identity and the social and political contexts more generally. His analysis of the album's commitments to African and Black aesthetics are especially astute. See Pond, 74-78.

States."[32] Hancock later acknowledged this, albeit in his oblique way, stating: "It [funk] was an area that appealed to me as far as my own ears and tastes were concerned, and for visceral reasons—because it's earthy and that's part of what I am."[33] If Mwandishi took Hancock to galactic locales, his succeeding projects returned from space to Earth.

Hancock's evolutions into popular veins of Black music and electronic instrumentation gained him swarms of new fans and sales.[34] They also made him a lightning rod for critical gatekeepers in the jazz and popular music press, which would continue in the *Future Shock* moment.[35] Hancock saw himself as an explorer and bridge-builder whose electronic experiments united with listeners outside the jazz world. However, some critics heard them as cynical business ploys solely calibrated to maximize sales. Many of these critiques, which often policed an impossible separation between authenticity and the commercial realities of the industry, were laced with implicit racism in how they derided popular Black genres as devoid of value. A prime example is writer Lee Underwood's take on a 1975 show during the *Head Hunters* phase:

> Mr. Communicate-With-A-Wider-Audience, Herbie Hancock, opened to a full house recently, again pleasing the funkers while disappointing the more cerebrally oriented connoisseurs. At its worst, Hancock's music is commercial trash; at its best, it is almost as schizoid as Frank Zappa's offerings. You have to separate the

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[32] Pond, 27.

[33] Bob Gallagher, "Hancock's Half Hour," *Melody Maker*, November 18, 1978, 14. Further, Hancock's "earthy" term, which he has used throughout his career, is potentially problematic. The idea of Black expressions as "earthy" resonates with a persistent racist discourse that regards Black people as more connected to the Earth and therefore inherently apt for physical labor, naturally dirty, biologically less intellectual, etc. Though this is not Hancock's intent—he is stating the personal appeal of funk the earthy characterization is jarring. As an aside, Hancock was not alone in using the term to describe funk. For example, a jazz reviewer lauded *Head Hunters* as "rhythmically earthy." See Chuck Mitchell, "Herbie Hancock: *Headhunters*," *Down Beat*, January 17, 1974, 22.

[34] Pond details the precipitous rise in sales of both "Chameleon" and *Head Hunters*, which was the first jazz album to go platinum. See Pond, x-xi.

[35] A 1985 profile described the polarity around Hancock, stating: "Everything about the forty-four-year-old keyboard player excites argument. Is he a brilliant innovator, bursting boundaries and pumping new life in tired jazz forms by prolific cross-breeding? Or is he a sell-out, a commercial claim-jumper ready to hitch a ride on any hot craze?" See Bill Flanagan, "Herbie Hancock," *Musician*, January 1, 1985, 57.

> music from the standardized harmonic/rhythmic soul format, and that, needless to say, is a chore.[36]

This elitist criticism persisted as Hancock re-geared his funk trajectory to flow into the prevailing currents of disco.[37] In deriding Hancock as a "'sell-out' in the truest sense of the word" in 1980, Harry Sumrall of *The Washington Post* deemed his pop forays "a renunciation of the innovative musical course which he followed in the late '60s and early '70s," describing his sound as "monotonous, incessant beats and shrill guitar chords."[38] Alongside the success of *Future Shock* in 1983, Hancock continued to have a polarizing effect. As one reviewer claimed, much of the album was "so removed from any originality that the formulaic programming enfolds upon itself in smug musical clichés."[39] In the moment Hancock defended his electro work, but his comment from a few years prior still pinpoints the latent anti-Black racism at the heart of such dismissals:

> It comes from the idea that jazz is superior music and all the rest is garbage and pablum to meet the whims of the public. Their criticism on that level shows a lack of respect for people's tastes and also a disrespect for black music, because jazz is a black music but so are all those other styles.[40]

In levelling his frustrations at the critics, Hancock points to how their attacks say more about their attitudes than the music itself. Needless to say, he stuck with his experiments.

"Ahhh! This stuff is really fresh"

"Rockit" is at once startling in its novelty, as announced by the introductory statements of a hip-hop DJ, Grand Mixer D.ST., swiftly pushing and dragging a record

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[36] Lee Underwood, "Around the World: Los Angeles," *Coda*, November 1975, 30.
[37] Between 1973 and 1982, he released a string of albums that eventually turned to disco stylings, including Hancock singing with a vocoder, a development critics and even some bandmates heard as disastrous. It is worth noting that in this period he also formed V.S.O.P., an acoustic jazz project that reunited him with players from a famed Miles Davis quintet, which, somewhat predictably, purist critics generally lauded.
[38] Harry Sumrall, "Herbie Hancock," *The Washington Post*, June 30, 1980, C9.
[39] Jim Brinsfield, "Herbie Hancock Future Shock," *Down Beat*, December 1983, 36.
[40] See Don Snowden, "In a Flurry of Funky Fusion," *Los Angeles Times*, September 14, 1980, T69.

back and forth under a turntable needle.[41] The pummeling rhythmic noise, which was punctuated by electronic drum blasts, are immediately distinctive, and for many, otherworldly. For a host of listeners, the track marked the first time hearing the indelible slurred swhooshes and snappy edges of a DJ scratching a slab of vinyl. As the sonic splashes hover at the threshold of intelligibility—their source material, a snippet from a vocoded exclamation of the phrase "Ahhh! This stuff is really fresh" is diced out of full recognition—only adds to an aura of the new, the unknown.[42] In addition to the constant barrage of scratching, the song's other signature components appear early in its five-minute flight. The broad strokes of "Rockit" are defined by recurring elements: the DJ scratching, pounding drum machine percussion, a jarring sample of metallic rock guitar, and repetitive melodic keyboard riffs. Hancock pursues an improvised synthesizer solo in the song's closing moments, but even that statement registers as an afterthought to these dominant sounds. The song blasts off with an air of immediacy and innovation, yet its futurity is underwritten by modes of return, both obvious and subtle. As the group works through cycles of musical repetition and variation—revisiting and reassembling those core musical features—they also synthesized details from a continuum of Black musical expression, cleverly merging the old with the new. The song's palpable sensations of movement imply an exit from our atmosphere into some science fiction future. Perhaps

[41] The DJ has gone by a number of variations on this moniker, eventually settling on GrandMixer DXT.
[42] My analysis of "Rockit" is informed by the work of Mark Katz and S.H. Fernando Jr., particularly when it comes to the process of how the song was created. On the topic of D.ST.'s cutting, Katz offers a detailed breakdown of the atomization of the "fresh" snippet, which was sourced from an electro single "Change the Beat" by the hip-hop impresario Fab 5 Freddy. Fernando Jr.'s article reveals that the vocoded phrase is not actually Freddy, but rather an acquaintance, Roger Trilling, who was in the studio during the recording. See Mark Katz, *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 97, and S.H. Fernando Jr., "Rockit Revisited: How Herbie Hancock Crafted a Hip-Hop Classic," *Cuepoint*, last modified April 20, 2015, https://medium.com/cuepoint/rockit-revisited-how-herbie-hancock-crafted-a-hip-hop-classic-12cd19406ca5#.75jsm0u9n.

its trajectory might be described more accurately as elliptical, as "Rockit" achieves a kind of low orbit around Earth, persistently circling back around even as it moves forward.

In many ways, the song bears a direct resemblance to Afrika Bambaataa's "Planet Rock," as it shares the ticking time bomb effect of drum machine beats, fierce sample stabs, and the affect of traversing space. Both songs were constructed using similar electronic musical equipment, most notably the Fairlight CMI sampler. The resemblance is also in the aural quality and content of Hancock's brief lyrical interjections. He not only flexed a vocoder to garble scat syllables, he used the voice synthesizer to twist and chop phrases cribbed from the "Planet Rock" lyrics, including the closing "Rock it, don't stop it" mantra.[43] But if Bambaataa's originary electro statement employed a notable economy in its foundations—its beats were spartan in their explosiveness—"Rockit" is maximalist in its sonic inclinations, every moment filled with whiplashing sounds. The central elements are fleshed out with pinballing low tones, floating synthesizer textures, a chugging bassline, polyrhythmic percussion patterns, and a bevy of sound effects samples. This aural torrent often has a science fiction quality in that they resemble identifiable noises, yet, their mobilization conjures the soundscapes of futuristic, electronic worlds. For example, D.ST.'s turntable manipulations invoke the barks of a digital dog. The popping sound that caps the initial flurry of turntablism was uttered by a machine, but could have been a finger pop in the cheek. Much like "Planet Rock" then, "Rockit" embodies a surging intensity that does not take itself too seriously.

The blending of hard edges and sonic playfulness resonated with the tendencies of early hip-hop productions, and, to an extent reflected the song's piecemeal evolution. "Rockit" and its popularity is evidence of the right people collaborating at the right

[43] Fernando Jr.

moment in time. Hancock's previous project, the disco-laden *Lite Me Up* (1982) album, had languished despite the involvement of songwriter and producer Rod Temperton, who was most known for penning hits for Michael Jackson.[44] As Hancock recounts in his memoir, two cassettes, a demo of musical sketches by the New York production group Material and a homemade mix by his godson Krishna Booker, played pivotal roles in his search for a fresh musical vehicle.[45] His new associate producer and road manager, Tony Meilandt, convinced him that Material, a loose group revolving around bassist Bill Laswell and keyboardist Michael Beinhorn, could deliver something cutting-edge and requested that they come to Los Angeles with song ideas (fig. 24).[46] Meilandt's intuition had to do with Material's sound, which was as much avant-garde as it was hip-hop, in part given its working relationships with an extensive network of performers and musicians that included Afrika Bambaataa, Fab 5 Freddy, and Grand Mixer D.ST. While waiting for Material's arrival, Hancock listened to Booker's tape, which included the song "Buffalo Gals" (1982) by Malcolm McLaren and the World's Famous Supreme Team. That track was structured around hip-hop DJs scratching records, novel swishes of sound that immediately caught Hancock's ear. As it turned out, Material had also mined the technique for its tape, as the first musical sketch prominently featured D.ST. In Hancock's words: "It was *exactly* what I was looking for. They didn't know it at the time,

[44] By this time, Temperton, a member of the funk and disco band Heatwave, had written "Rock With You" (1979) and "Off the Wall" (1979). In 1983 penned the title track for the *Thriller* album, including the iconic spoken word interlude performed by the actor Vincent Price.
[45] Hancock, 237.
[46] Material was not so much a group as it was a collective with a rotating cast of collaborators that by 1983 already included Brian Eno, David Byrne, Nona Hendryx, James Chance and Olu Dara. See Richard Grabel, "Material: When Is A Band Not A Band?" *New Musical Express*, April 4, 1981, http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/material-when-is-a-band-not-a-band.

but soon as I played that tape I said, that's it, that's the one."[47] After a short studio session to record additional keyboard elements, that demo became "Rockit."

Though "Rockit" is fundamentally a cyborg melding of machine and human, it would be easy to imagine the song was created by a band of robots. The electronic textures and regimentation of the beats conspicuously efface human traces, helping to divert the cognizance that musicians triggered the rhythms and samples, moved the records on a turntable, punched away at synthesizer keys, or played live drums. These sorts of manipulations entailed a group of musicians synthesizing older musical modes with new machines and techniques. Hancock and Beinhorn exploited the potential of keyboard synthesizers to produce entirely new tonalities and textures. D.ST., one of a core group of DJs pioneering and perfecting practices that would give rise to modern-day turntablism, brought a percussionist's sensibility to an existing form of playback technology.[48] Drummer Daniel Ponce played the batá, a double-headed drum that in Cuban culture has spiritual and political valences, alongside digital beats programmed on drum machines. These modes of hybridization, which resulted in an uncanny, synthetic musical character, were central to the song's impressions of uniqueness and its allure. In contrast to feeding existing anxieties about technological dehumanization and catastrophic destruction, "Rockit" looked to capitalize on another dimension of risk: the excitement about where working with new technologies might take humankind.

I argue that much of the song's appeal also lay in how it synthesized electronic textures with existing Black musical statements and performance. As "Rockit" worked

[47] Paolo Hewitt, "Herbie Hancock: Herbie Rides Again!" *New Musical Express*, August 6, 1983, http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/herbie-hancock-herbie- rides-again-2.
[48] D.ST. deserves further study. For good introductory profiles, see Graham K. Smith, "D.ST Sounds," *Record Mirror*, January 14, 1984, 10; Paul Bradshaw, "Grandmixer D.ST: A Cut-Up Above the Rest," *New Musical Express*, January 21, 1984; and John Leland, "D.ST," *Spin*, November 1, 1985: 25-27.

through hip-hop techniques and sounds, much of its musical DNA can be traced to earlier expressions. For its foundation, Laswell developed a bassline that condensed two disparate sources. The first was a vocal sequence from the song "Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt" (1966) by jazz saxophonist Pharoah Sanders while the end section draws from funk group The Jimmy Castor Bunch.[49] Drum machines propelled the syncopated drive "Rockit" along with polyrhythmic patterns known as clave, which structures traditional Afro-Cuban music, played by Ponce on the Batá drum. For the central hook, Laswell encouraged Hancock to dip into his back catalog, resulting in a melody that draws on his monster hit "Chameleon" from 1972.[50] This injected "Rockit" with a dose of funk and grounded it in the political sensibilities of a specific historical event, one that had spontaneously mixed pleasure, notions of technology, and Black resistance. The song's melodic inspiration arrived at Wattstax, a 1972 concert commemorating the seventh anniversary of the Watts Rebellion.[51] Saxophonist Bennie Maupin, who developed the core melodic ideas for "Chameleon," described his experience at the show:

> When the music would start playing, everybody would start doing the funky robot. … I was watching these kids, and I was looking at their body movement. And I started to just hear in my mind melodies centered around that kind of movement. And that's when the melody fragments for "Chameleon" came into my head. I was just sitting there.[52]

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[49] "Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt" is the opening track of Pharoah Sanders' 1966 album *Tauhid*. Laswell does not specify a song by The Jimmy Castor Bunch, but the bassline of "Rockit" shares some of the punchy spring of "It's Just Begun," the title track of the group's 1972 album. Laswell discusses these references in 2013 interview. See Peter Wetherbee, "Bill Laswell: PiL, Material, Herbie Hancock," *Tape Op*, January/February 2013, http://tapeop.com/interviews/93/bill-laswell/.

[50] In a 2013 interview, Laswell said: "The track was killing before we got to L.A.; it was already great. Herbie asked, 'What am I going to play?' I said, 'Think about Manu Dibango. Think about 'Chameleon.' We pretty much hummed it to him." See Wetherbee. Also see Katz, 96.

[51] The six days of unrest in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles began August 11, 1965, in reaction to ongoing police discrimination and violence. The rebellion left much of the neighborhood destroyed. The Wattstax event, which was intended as a benefit concert for the community, presented a host of top flight Black entertainers, including Richard Pryor, Isaac Hayes, Carla Thomas and The Bar-Kays.

[52] Pond, 73. Glimpses of the scenes that Maupin describes can be viewed in the documentary *Wattstax* (Mel Stuart, 1973). In the film, dancers break out a wide variety of robot moves as funk singer Rufus Thomas performs. The year after Wattstax, Thomas released the "Funky Robot" (1973), an ode to the dance craze.

Maupin's statement and its context demonstrates how the musical lineage of "Rockit" already included gestures toward the intersection of racial solidarity and the pleasures that might be taken in technology, i.e. the figure of the android. Though the song seems to be devoid of overt political statements, in this light, it can be understood to have positively amplified the promise of the emergent hip-hop culture and its musical styles, as well as synthesized the signal traces of a longer continuum of Black creative expression.

Ultimately, "Rockit" suggests the achievement of escape velocity, the journey of a vehicle warping toward the far reaches of the galaxy. Yet, the elliptical character of the track dictates a different flight plan. Its rhythmic and textural modulations work within a series of cycles that return to familiar statements and sounds. The signature elements—swift cutting on the word "fresh," Hancock's synthesizer throwbacks to "Chameleon," jarring stabs of sampled guitar, slamming crescendo lines of electronic drums—are incessantly reiterated. For Hancock, the novel technological edge of these details signaled and expressed potential, a perspective that new worlds might be possible. The song's structure though, keeps those discoveries as beacons off on the horizon of the future. The song's evocation of movement translates to a kind of low orbiting around Earth, a calculated balance between gravity and momentum, perpetually falling without crashing. Though thrilling, the trajectory points to different array of gravitational currents, forces at play on the surface of the Earth that are not so easily eluded. This undeniable sense of tethering, much of which has to do with the dynamics circulating around racial Blackness, would be further articulated in the landmark video for the song.

"I don't want it to look like a 'black guy' video"

> Humor is never divorced from depression and upset and all this. It's always there to color up something. Or as a mask. … The humorous front is one that I hope stays with the observer for a while until perhaps they go home and then the more macabre instincts take over and they think of it in a different light.[53]
>
> —Jim Whiting, 1982

Even as "Rockit" charted a new direction, one Hancock heard as rejuvenating, executives at Columbia were far from enthusiastic, fearing his fans might be turned off by its sound. The company initially balked on a marketing budget, and, as a result, Hancock covered the fees for what would be his first music video. He also faced another daunting industry hurdle, MTV's policy of refusing to program works featuring Black performers. In a pragmatic move, Hancock handed creative control to Kevin Godley and Lol Creme, a pair of British art-pop rockers turned video directors, with a sole condition: "I don't want it to look like a 'black guy' video."[54] With this directive in mind, the directors shaped the visuals around the now famous kinetic sculptures by the British artist Jim Whiting (fig. 25).[55] This careful avoidance of displaying Blackness rendered the video sufficiently safe for MTV. In many ways, the calculated gamble paid off, as the video was an immediate critical and popular hit that went on to win a host of honors, including a haul of spaceman trophies at the inaugural MTV Video Music Awards ceremony that outnumbered those for Michael Jackson's "Thriller" (John Landis,

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[53] *Heavenly Bodies*, directed by Sam Scoggins (1982; London, UK: Royal College of Art), 16MM, https://vimeo.com/109322535.

[54] As Hancock recounts, he had just started watching MTV, but his favorite videos included Godley and Creme's featurettes for The Police singles "Wrapped Around Your Finger" and "Every Breath You Take." In telling the directors to avoid anything that would clearly mark the video as Black, Hancock said, "I want it to look like something that could have been made by Duran Duran or the Police." See Hancock, 241-242.

[55] In a moment of good timing, two weeks prior to receiving Hancock's video request, Godley and Creme saw a television story about Whiting's sculptures and bookmarked them for use down the road. As Godley described it, "Then Herbie's track came in, and it was the obvious choice to marry the two things together." See Tom Popson, "Robot rock: The making of a great video," *Chicago Tribune*, February 12, 1984, K31.

1983).[56] It propelled record sales of both the "Rockit" single and the *Future Shock* album, and helped net Hancock a performance slot on the 1984 Grammy Awards.

Accolades notwithstanding, the video transmitted a dizzying confluence of ideas about race, often in plain view. At a base level, the pale plaster and wax bodies of the automatons could not help but imbue the scenario with a sense of Whiteness as a suburban social norm. In eschewing overt visual traces of Blackness, the racial color line and its attendant antagonisms remained squarely at the heart of the video.[57] Hancock's imperative to skirt the issue helped destabilize the racial restrictions that originally concerned him. Alongside a crucial sequence of Michael Jackson videos, "Rockit" amplified the pressure on MTV's racist programming guidelines.[58] Yet, the video persisted in dallying with regressive and, in key moments, violent anti-Black ideologies. In this sense, the extreme absurdity of the video was not far removed from the conditions of real life, but rather acted as a distorted funhouse mirror of twentieth century existence. At an immediate glance, Godley and Creme's treatment was a perfect fit for the song. The basic premise—a household of robots locked in repetitive loops of slapstick action—resonated with the song's electronic character and its vein of flippant humor. A frenetic editing style, which often amounted to rhythmic jerking between forward and backward footage, delivered a visual analog for the sounds of seesawing turntable manipulations.

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[56] "Rockit" topped five categories, including best concept, special effects, art direction, editing, and experimental. In addition to being named to many critics' top ten lists, the video also took awards in the innovation and art categories at *Billboard*'s Video Music Awards and the American Video Awards. See Ken Terry, "'Rockit,' 'Thriller' Big Winners in MTV Music Video Awards," *Variety*, September 19, 1984, 115-116; "Jackson Cops Five Music Vid Awards," *Billboard*, November 26, 1983, 1, 60; and "'Beat It', 'Rockit' Top Second Annual AVA's," *Back Stage*, April 13, 1984, 42.

[57] This is not to say that race is the only dynamic at play in the video, nor do I intend to claim Hancock's racial identity is what solely defines him. Instead, I am attempting to parse the multifarious ways that alarming ideas about race persist in manifesting, even when they seem to be treated conscientiously.

[58] A trio of Jackson videos—"Billie Jean" (Steve Barron, 1983), "Beat It" (Bob Giraldi, 1983), "Thriller" (John Landis, 1983)—are widely regarded as breaking open MTV's policy of only playing "rock" videos. For an oral history of this situation, see "I'm Not Like Other Boys: Michael Jackson Saves a Struggling Network from Itself" in Marks and Tannenbaum, 173-188.

Additionally, the combination of the domicile's chaotic environment and the perpetually cluttered camera frame matched the song's maximalist sensibility.[59] Yet, as the old cliché goes, the devil was in the details, particularly when it came to its portrayals of what are fundamentally human concerns. The specifics of the production pointed to how the group of automatons was not only saddled with libidinal fixations on sex and violence but also cultural tendencies toward marginalizing and effacing traces of racial Blackness. Whiting's machines were not so much futuristic inventions of science fiction but rather life-size wind-up toys that performed human foibles. As one art critic put it, the "manic mechanical bodies weigh heavy with contemporary sin."[60] Despite the coordination between the video's visual attributes and the song's sonic characteristics, the works ultimately strike vastly dissonant tones. The music openly revels in and affirms the emergent styles and expressive techniques of young people of color, and, in a sense, implicitly looks to chart a new sort of technologically-enabled future for them. In contrast, much of the mechanical action in the video may register as nonsensical, but it also transmits a dystopian sense of tension, an autodestructive White neurosis that finds its only moment of relief in the destruction of a virtual Black body.

That this divergence happened in sync with Godley and Creme's attempts to match Hancock's music was symptomatic of a gulf in understanding about popular depictions of Black subjects. Part of this had to do with the duo's waggish aesthetic approach, which writer Mark Rowland characterized as "irreverent, esoteric and not a

[59] At the time, music critic Lynden Barber argued the video "captures all the irreverence, energy and rhythm of electrofunk, the robotic nature of the beat caricatured brilliantly as plastic torsoes and body-less legs jerk and jump in a celebration of electric havoc." See Lynden Barber, "Rockit Man," *Melody Maker*, August 13, 1983, 27.
[60] Liz Kavanagh, "Jim Whiting's Mechanical Sculptures," *Apollo* 127, no. 311 (January 1988): 33.

little self-indulgent."[61] Further, the directors were not unaware of how some Black musicians had been historically portrayed on film. The aesthetic for the video that brought them their biggest acclaim, a featurette for The Police single "Every Breath You Take" (1983), referenced the aesthetic of Gjon Mili's *Jammin' the Blues* (1944).[62] Mili's short film was hailed for its elegant use of low-key lighting to capture jazz greats such as saxophonist Lester Young and trumpeter Harry "Sweets" Edison, at the height of their careers.[63] It seems that a core strategy for Mili and his editor Norman Granz was to highlight the performers' musical dexterity—and their race. The lone White musician, guitarist Barney Kessel, was positioned in shadows so that only his hands, which had been dyed, can be seen moving around his instrument.[64] In a sense, Godley and Creme's homage to *Jammin' the Blues* had little to do with the understanding the film's subjects and more with how they were stylized.[65] The video for "Rockit" stands as a subsequent example of style over substance, particularly when it comes to how Blackness is represented and treated. Perhaps some of the video's cognitive dissonance can be chalked up to a lack of cultural context, after all, the directors were not Americans. Hancock noted this in his thoughts on MTV's policies to a British publication: "I was more aware of it, I think, than Godley and Creme, because that's not really a factor over here, it's not

[61] By 1983 the directors had already made acclaimed videos for The Police, Elton John and Duran Duran. See Mark Rowland, "Godley and Creme," *Musician*, December 1, 1983, 80.
[62] Ibid.
[63] The depictions are so compelling that one pair of jazz critics claimed, "*Jammin' the Blues* will most likely remain the greatest film to depict jazz musicians in their natural habitat." See Frank Driggs and Harris Lewine, *Black Beauty, White Heat: A Pictorial History of Classic Jazz, 1920-1950* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1982): 268.
[64] See Peter Keepnews, "Barney Kessel, 80, a Guitarist With Legends of Jazz, Is Dead," *The New York Times*, May 8, 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/08/arts/barney-kessel-80-a-guitarist-with-legends-of-jazz-is-dead.html.
[65] See Rowland, 80.

something they would think about."[66] Regardless of reason or intention, while the video complemented core elements of the song's sound, it was Janus-faced in its treatment of race.

From the outset, the video inhabited a theme of duality. Following a crane shot that captures the cramped, uniform residences of a London suburb, the camera offers a close-up of a doorstep complete with a nostalgic marker of domestic life, the delivery of fresh milk. The normalcy of this scene is quickly disrupted as the front door opens and a trousered leg kicks over the bottles. What follows is an amusing, unnerving description of what goes on unseen behind closed doors in seemingly ordinary houses: unremitting cycles of interpersonal violence and erotic desire. Stereotypical signs of domesticity—newspaper reading, family meals, bubble baths—are shadowed, if not overwhelmed, by the inhabitants repetitively churning through aggressive conflict and simulated sex acts. It is not immediately clear if the tableau is meant as an expression of repressed human desires or a critique that tacitly reasserts traditional social conventions.

This potent combination pervades both the overall dynamics of the scenario and the discrete actions of Whiting's automatons. The house is populated by more individuals than one might expect, yet perhaps they all seem to fit in the space given their ragged stages of incompletion. The idiosyncratic dismemberments of these half-finished Frankensteins spans the gamut of heads with no faces, bodies with no heads, torsos with no legs, and legs with no bodies. Though each figure is unique, they share pale hues of plaster, wax and white paint, which, again, presents Whiteness as the norm. The

[66] Barber, "Rockit Man," 27. Further, Godley stated he and Creme were unfamiliar with the circumstances, saying: "We didn't know anything about it. We just thought to feature Herbie too much anyway would be wrong. The thing that counts is whether the film is good, whether the film will promote the record, not how much the artist is in it." See Popson, K31.

cumulative sum of their movements is agitation, as their disjointed appendages flail and jolt about in awkward but forceful spasms. In the living room three pairs of suit trousers and dress shoes execute pointed kicks. Meanwhile in the kitchen, a headless woman endlessly smacks a suited male on the back of the head, sending him splatting into a bowl of oatmeal over and over again. Such knockabout disorder often overlaps with more carnal operations. In a bedroom, a faceless plaster-man fiercely humps away, his head and the blankets alternating abrupt thrusts. Two figures in the background, a man with exposed plastic lungs and an enlarged stork's head, peep on the solitary act through a window. A gendered sense of titillation arcs across the living room, as a pair of female legs sporting blue satin panties struts for a group of twitchy male figures. Throughout the rooms, men in suits slowly swivel their heads, surveying with blank expressions. A handful of figures have floppy tubular lights for eyes, perhaps not-so-subtle indicators of what is on their minds. All these beings are on the brink of losing control; wound up and let to run, their exposed armatures barely holding them in check.

Small television screens emitting Hancock's image are fixtures throughout the video, but they are positioned among the many background objects in the disorderly set and are captured from skewed angles. By the time one's eyes fix on their blue glow, the video makes a dizzying camera move or rapid edit. After two tangential glimpses, one blocked by gyrating legs and another of the musician's back, his first clear appearance presents his hands tapping out the song's melody on a synthesizer. In line with the repetitious structure of the song, this close-up becomes a visual refrain, reappearing again and again but from different televisions scattered throughout the rooms.[67] At times the

[67] Hancock's hands were the central source material for the subsequent, lesser-known video that Godley and Creme made for the "Autodrive" (1983) single. Alongside shots of Hancock's white-gloved hands

image of his fingers dancing across the keyboard is exchanged for a medium shot taken from behind that obscures his figure but reveals his wardrobe, a dapper double-breasted suit (fig. 26). The wider shot also emphasizes the blue tint of the screens, which diffuses Hancock against the blank space behind him. Further, he is often front lit, rendering him in competition with his shadow. The fragmentation of his body continues, as subsequent shots synced to vocoded lyrics show only his face. Finally, at the midway point, the camera yields the full frame to a screen on which Hancock is captured from the chest up, voicing scat syllables into a headset and rubbing his palms together in time with scratch sounds. The marginal physical and visual arrangement of the televisions belies their outsized influence, as the synchronized editing implies that Hancock's presence serves to incite the frenzied action.

The bewildering tone of the scenario, slapdash comedy belying a malevolent undercurrent, sprung from Whiting's artistic preoccupations with the form and mechanics of human bodies.[68] By the early 1980s his partially clothed mechanical bodies were as much examinations of movement as they were surveys of human neuroses and wanton tendencies. As he told an interviewer: "More often than not, I end up making something which I'm sure … would have given Freud a field day."[69] He confirmed his works were explorations of twisted ties between human behavior and emotional drives in assigning cheeky names to his figures, many of whom were included in the "Rockit" household. For example, "the clouting woman" and "the wanking man." Perhaps the most notorious

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dancing across the keys of a Jupiter synthesizer and then a grand piano, the directors created a Busby Berkeley-esque production that replaced showgirls with troupes of hands in different color gloves.

[68] As Whiting describes it, a formative accident occurred in the late 1970s when he hung his jacket on a motorized contraption he was building. Turning the apparatus on sent the clothing unexpectedly flapping around the studio. The gesticulations suggested ghostly humanoid forms that he has investigated ever since.

[69] *South of Watford*, directed by Nigel Miller (1986; London, UK: London Weekend Television Colour Production), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAHWgM2Jzfc.

was the trio of high-kicking legs on the couch, a piece entitled *Pervy Men* that featured prominently in the video and then toured America and Europe in Hancock's live shows. Whiting talked of this sculpture in terms of sentience and affection:

> There are three trousers trying to express themselves by means of a computer and some compressed air. They're trying to be endearing. They're trying to be loved. They're actually three pervy men, three pervy trousers, and they're pervs. … On the outside, they're quite sweet really.[70]

It was with this sculpture that Whiting developed his signature technique for fusing "muscles" composed of plastic hoses and flexible joints with computer-controlled devices pumping compressed air. The "quite sweet" texture of the polyester suit pants concealed a potential for sudden viciousness as five horsepower motors drove their "pervy" kicks.

Despite the immediate absurdity of such works, their detailed melding of the comedic and the macabre also made for a reproving, if not outlandishly didactic, tenor. Amid a host of reviews that breezily lauded the "Rockit" video as visual eye candy, a handful noted a darker current. For example, *Melody Maker* critic Dessa Fox detected an apocalyptic thread in the wiring of the automatons in claiming, "The droids in 'Rockit' come across as Robby the Robots miming the Book of Revelations, or, at the very least, a bunch of department store detainees."[71] Their deeds presaged a collapse in which humans became mindlessly governed by their proclivities. The fine art world made similar assessments of Whiting installations from the time, finding their satire diagnosed a crisis in the state of human affairs in the late 1980s. Critic Liz Kavanagh argued Whiting's work "illuminates the absurdity of contemporary behaviour, repeated again and again to emphasize its mania, and invites his audience to delight in his figures deservedly coming

[70] Ibid.
[71] Dessa Fox, "Videodrome," *Melody Maker*, December 24, 1983, 16.

to grief."[72] The artist agreed with this appraisal, characterizing his pieces as "soap operas," allegorical fables of a mechanical sort: "The audience is warned of an inevitable downfall if they behave in a particular way."[73] This framing of the works as behavioral deterrents constituted a conservative attitude that conflicted with Whiting's previous fondness for the likes of *Pervy Men*. Earlier in his career he regarded the beings as manifestations of longings for a life unencumbered by such social mores:

> I think a lot of it depicts my want of a kind of bohemian existence but knowing that I couldn't find it because it would require giving up some sort of securities. A lot of it is kind of an expression of wanting to be like that. I mean, like these convulsing legs, they're very sexual.[74]

This is to contend that Whiting's installation, and by extension the video, can be understood in terms of synthesis, i.e. a rich site of contradictory tensions. With the automatons, the video trends toward libidinous fantasies while also recognizing them as unhealthy transgressions. But even as it does so, the work encourages a mode of displacement rather than a true acknowledgement of such entanglements. As Kavanagh points out, Whiting lures viewers into taking pleasure in the pains of his figures rather than themselves. So then perhaps the work serves to distract from, if not defuse, any self-examination of one's own hang-ups or psychic complexes that might stem from broader social values, particularly normative investments in racial Whiteness.

A strain of distraction pervaded much of the critical response to the video, as writers generally described the actions of the machines and the directors' techniques without attending to their potential substance. More tellingly, these accounts tended to be overshadowed by interest in the production's technical aspects. For example, as Mark

[72] Kavanagh, 33-34.
[73] Kavanagh, 34.
[74] *South of Watford*.

Rowland claimed in *Musician*, the "Rockit" video "was almost entirely a product of the editing room."[75] Dessa Fox of *Melody Maker* followed suit in deeming the work, "the technical bright idea of the year."[76] This praise centered on how the directors and their video editor, Roo Aiken, spliced and synced clips of footage to the sounds of the DJ scratching. The editing technique and its audiovisual result was by design, as Godley and Creme had aimed for a non-narrative scenario, going so far as to decline storyboarding for the video. Instead, their planning focused on capturing shots that could be copied forwards and backwards and then rhythmically slammed together.[77] The brisk edits not only imitated the push and pull of vinyl being manipulated to percussive effect, they sent the viewer leaping through the house from room to room and from detail to detail within those jumbled spaces. As such, the editing approach also opened momentary spaces for Hancock to still play a visible, albeit glancing, role in his own video.

The calculated decision to present Hancock as a televisual presence implemented a familiar practice of marginalizing Black subjects, yet it did not entirely suppress or totally ignore traces of racial Blackness. Instead, Hancock's brief appearances bared the open secret of MTV's discriminatory procedures. As such, the video played an active participant in an ongoing public conversation about the practices of the channel and the surrounding music business.[78] In this light, the video stands as an index of how a specific racial restriction played out in the popular media landscape of the late twentieth century. Journalistic accounts regarded the issue as a rather straightforward, albeit hugely

[75] Rowland, 82.
[76] Fox, 16.
[77] Rowland, 82.
[78] This was clear to many music writers, as demonstrated by how articles and reviews mentioned the biased circumstances or asked Hancock about them. For just a handful of examples, see: Popson; Barber, "Rockit Man," 27; and Clarence Page, "Racial bias … and all that jazz," *Chicago Tribune*, September 14, 1986, D3.

important, dilemma for performers of color to be included by MTV. The "Rockit" video continues to attest to how the question was not only about more equitable representation. The form and content of that representation was also of grave but unrecognized consequence. In its execution, this specific iteration of downplaying the visible presence of race arrived with another set of disturbing ideological notions about Blackness. At a base level, Godley and Creme's video literally objectified Hancock, transforming him into a physical device, the television. Amid a house of seemingly sentient machines, these electronic appliances are made to blend into the scenery while simultaneously standing apart. Again, the pale spectrum of the plaster and wax bodies suggests this is a racially White unit of beings against which Hancock's illusory materializations register him as an outlier. This portrayal, albeit cunning and creative, had the effect of further entangling race with longstanding cultural anxieties about electronic communication media.

While the greater part of the production is devoted to Whiting's machines, flashy camera maneuvers and editing, in a warped way Hancock is the subject of the video's parting shot. As the video nears its conclusion, he receives more focused attention. After a last dose of *Pervy Men* and the bionic strip tease in the living room, both of which are set to an abridged synthesizer solo, the video offers a four-shot progression of the televisions. The first three capture the screens from cock-eyed angles, offering incomplete views that excise parts of Hancock's face. The final scene comprises a bookend for the video, looping back to where it began outside the front door of the home. As the sound comes to a sudden standstill, a mutilated television drops from the top of the frame and smashes apart on the mat where only minutes before two milk bottles once stood. The blunt ending indicates a physical expulsion of the device and, by extension,

Hancock. The violent finale seems fitting given the overall tenor of the video, yet it is also perplexing in its singular exclamation of demolition and ejection. Though the other automatons may have been well on their way to similar fates, none of them had reached a stage of self-destruction. Why such unceremonious treatment for this object, particularly in light of the racial dynamics that surrounded it?

At one level, the conclusion fulfills a trope of televisual media as haunting presences that necessitate forceful removal. Media scholar Jeffrey Sconce details how television has long been regarded as "a sinister space within the home," objects that establish a conduit between social reality and its uncanny, electronic doppelganger world.[79] A range of anxieties in this vein have taken many forms in the American popular imaginary, a specific strain of which from the early 1960s reverberated twenty years later with the advent of MTV. As Sconce notes, an argument that gained purchase in the 1960s concerned how media technologies purportedly encouraged a general state of distraction, reducing mass audiences to blank passivity, unthinking organic machines.[80] Dispatching this menace, typically through violent means such as shooting through its screen, became a familiar event in popular media accounts.[81]

Hyperbole notwithstanding, this degree of fear returned in the early 1980s, specifically in relation to the escalating market reach of MTV, which was said to have

[79] Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 17.
[80] In 1961, Newton Minow, then chair of the FCC, famously summed up this corrupting force, calling television a "vast wasteland." See Sconce, 132.
[81] Sconce opens his text on haunted media with a newspaper story about a real-life "television assassin" from 1952. He goes on to state, "Although it would be difficult to document exactly how many people really do shoot their sets in a given year, it is easy to gauge the symbolic importance of this act by how frequently it appears in films, books, and even in television programming itself." See Sconce, 1-3.

grown to 28 million homes by 1985.[82] That exponential spread was accompanied by hysteria about the aesthetics of music videos and the network itself. The channel's round-the-clock programming was characterized by some critics as a 24-hour bombardment of quick-fire editing that spewed a disjointed cavalcade of superficial, crass, and often lascivious, imagery and sound. One writer intimated that the unbroken torrent of sensory stimulation was producing "electric sheep," videodrones "bordering on psychosis" given the televisual stunting of their cognitive and emotional faculties.[83] Against this backdrop, the exaggerated scenes of "Rockit" scan as a self-reflexive acknowledgment—and mischievous tweaking—of the critique that music television was becoming an ever-intrusive presence in the home. Given Godley and Creme's penchant for irreverent humor, perhaps the ending portrays the enduring fantasy of destroying one's television, not so much out of grave concern but for the sheer cathartic hell of it.

That this object of aggravation was the sole sign of Blackness or racial difference complicates an interpretation of the ending as reflecting anxieties about media technology. The decision to contain Hancock's persona and performance within the televisions because of his Blackness renders race an unavoidable dynamic, especially in the destructive concluding statement. The damage implicitly transmits a disregard for Blackness that is as casual as it is deadly. With this in mind, it seems that race cannot help but haunt the video through its televisual presence and subsequent audiovisual transmissions. This is confirmed by the eerie radiance of the screens. As critic Dessa Fox noted in her review: "Everything is saturated in shades of blue, which, as any promo

[82] See Paula Span, "Music Meets TV And KAPOW!: MTV, the Rock Video Cable, Turns a Stylish 4," *The Washington Post*, August 1, 1985, B1.
[83] In 1984, music writer Don Watson lamented a nightmarish compounding effect what with the advent of more channels to compete with MTV and the seeming ubiquity of screens showing music in public spaces. See Don Watson, "Videodrone," *New Musical Express*, October 20, 1984, 14-15, 55.

person will tell you, is video's most naturally creepy colour."[84] Perhaps we might say that Blackness in this objectified, electrified form is configured as a sinister technology, one that is constructed and animated through a jumbled ensemble of circuitry comprising ideologies, anxieties and violence that might be unconscious but ultimately regressive.

Much like the enduring concerns about televisual media that Sconce notes, these Black boxes and their transmissions arrive with the additional baggage of panics revolving around notions of repulsion and violation, i.e. baseless racial fantasies about people of color as obnoxious, intrusive forces that threaten to destabilize a cultural order organized around Whiteness. These latent fears become evident in both subtle and obvious ways. The placement of the televisions in unassuming spots such as the corner of a room or amid the messy tops of dressers and kitchen counters, suggests their contents amount to ambient stimuli. Hancock's presence, both the spectral image of his bodily persona and the frantic sounds of his music, provides a background videotrack for the inhabitants. Despite being held at a distance, his audiovisual presence has the effect of exacerbating the libidinal and aggressive currents coursing through the household. For example, his cyborg utterances of "don't stop it" urge on the solitary "wanking man" and the closing keyboard solo sends the *Pervy Men* into kicking fits. The synchronization of image and sound, along with the rhythmic editing, insinuate that the televised signals contribute to the automatons' unraveling.

This tortured relationship implies that Hancock might also play an operator role. In addition to offering a videotrack for the bizarre ensemble, perhaps he is orchestrating their frenzy of actions from a remote location. The televisions still offer limited displays of Blackness, but they also have a two-way monitoring function that offers him views

[84] Fox, 16.

into the house. Hancock, then, appears to joyfully manipulate the automatons, pushing the limits of their mechanical apparatuses and driving their excessive tendencies toward abandon. In this light, the video continues to offer a critique of the repetitious, violent undercurrents of White suburban existence. In his role as a kind of mad scientist, Hancock is a knowing creative mastermind, one who reveals (and revels in) the neuroses of those tendencies through his audiovisual experiments. To clarify, this is not to suggest that any of this was Hancock's intention, as again, he professed to having little say in the concept and making of the video. Instead, the production manages to both marginalize his presence while subtly portraying him as a central player in this confusing scene.

In both cases, Blackness is still understood and presented as a kind of threat to the operations of so-called normative life. Even though the video was designed to avoid overt markers of race, it implicitly characterizes Blackness, in both vision and sound, as an agitating stressor, if not a danger to the autonomy of racial Whiteness. Even though the video was designed to avoid overt markers of race, it implicitly characterizes Blackness, in both vision and sound, as an agitating stressor. Regardless of the already dysfunctional state of the domestic scene, the ending conveys the message that neither television nor Blackness belong in its vicinity. Not only must these technologies be rejected, but they require silencing by violent means. Perhaps this destruction buys the scene some modicum of relief from its tensions, but it comes at the cost of the simulated obliteration of the Black body.

In this light, the video indirectly backfired in its maneuvers to evade MTV's racialized programming policies by adhering to a variety of anti-Black sensibilities. Gaining air time for Hancock's work became possible with the enforcement of a physical

mode of segregation and a spectacular display of virtual violence. Additionally, as much as the video's structure privileged the music, it subtly maintained an entrenched cultural narrative about the purported incoherency of Black subjects. Given the apparent agitating, interfering quality of the television broadcasts, both Hancock's music and visage constituted, in a word, noise. As cultural theorist Tricia Rose indicates, this characterization, which has often been levied against hip-hop music, was symptomatic of a continuum of White dismissals of Black cultural expressions.[85] From this perspective, the cyclical, strident qualities of a song such as "Rockit" parse as simpleminded and repetitive, "noise" that is unintelligible and potentially threatening.

While a discussion of Black "noise" provides some explanation of the more perplexing dynamics of the video, it is also damning that so few concerns have ever been raised about the production's representations of race. For example, the concluding destruction of the television has elicited no critical commentary despite its peculiar equation with Blackness. That scholars and journalists have remained largely oblivious to this alignment and its implications reveals a broader inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to perceive such violence. To argue this another way, in performing its dense synthesis of competing ideas, the "Rockit" video exposes viewers to different signal traces of "noise." The dangerous interference that the video entertainingly attaches to television and racial Blackness effectively displaces and distracts from a more pervasive static broadcast by other technologies. That is, devices such as racial ideologies and anxieties that inhibit us from seeing and hearing people of color and their cultural expressions as anything but unintelligible and invasive. These tools not only enable the marginalization and

[85] See Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994): 62-63.

demonization of Black bodies, they make possible machinations that are less visible and often harder to discern, namely the ongoing maintenance and naturalization of a dysfunctional world governed by White supremacy.

Despite these complications, it is evident that many viewers and critics decoded the video's noises in a variety of ways, often to affirmative effect, as borne out by its numerous awards and eventual videocassette sales (the inclusion of the video was a selling point for the release of a live Hancock concert on VHS hi-fi format in 1984).[86] For Hancock, the "Rockit" video cast the song in a distinctly human light:

> The interesting thing is the music has a robotic side to it, and it has an emphasis on technology, but I think the video purposely carried it to its extremes. In other words, the video being *so* robotic and *so* technological, that makes the music sound even more earthy in contrast.[87]

The performer returned to the "earthy" adjective, which he used years earlier as a subtle referent for racial Blackness. Hancock, then, was quite keen on how the excessive visual representations of the video underscored the existing racial valences of his music. In a somewhat counterintuitive way, the exaggerated qualities of the video made Blackness more legible. For a host of viewers, especially young people of color already engaged in hip-hop, "Rockit" resonated as an affirmation of their interests, practices and lives. As Katz once asserted: "Ask any hip-hop DJ who was between eight and eighteen in 1983 how they caught the bug, and you'll probably get a one-word answer: 'Rockit.'"[88] The video helped the burgeoning music and its attendant cultures gain an unexpected platform

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[86] *Herbie Hancock and the Rockit Band* (Ken O'Neil, 1984), most of which was filmed at a London concert, was released just over a year after "Rockit" originally debuted in June of 1983. The production mimicked the fitful editing style of the Godley and Creme's music video while also incorporating a new round of special effects and visual distortion. See "Hancock Cassette Bringing CBS/Fox Into VHS Hi-Fi Era," *Variety*, May 9, 1984, 12, 528.
[87] Barber, "Rockit Man," 27.
[88] See Katz, 93.

on one of the premiere venues of popular media, and, as a result, effectively validated their "noise" as a legitimate, urgent mode of creative expression.

As earthbound and troubling as the production is, Hancock's performance and its accompanying sounds portray a persistent sense of mobility made available via music technologies. Visually, the small television screens suggest the idea of containment, but they also resemble the windows of a cockpit through which a pilot can be observed at a bank of controls, i.e. Hancock at his keyboard. The momentary views into this scene propose a more complimentary relationship with machines. In contrast to how the automatons of the house are rigid and unyielding in their chaotic actions, Hancock's performance is dexterous and fluid. The boogie in his gestures suggest a communing with electronics has occurred; an intertwining but not a corporeal takeover. The spasm of violence at the end of the video terminates this transmission, but Hancock, in a way, had already escaped the virtual attack. He had never really been there in the first place as the cockpit shots were beamed in from elsewhere. Despite Hancock's technologically mediated presence or marginalization by the video's libidinal excess and anti-Black tendencies, it undoubtedly gained widespread traction, as evidenced by the success of the song, the video, and a stunning live televised performance that would soon follow.

Hancock's live arrival

Though the 26th Annual Grammy Awards are popularly regarded as Michael Jackson's night given his record-breaking haul of eight trophies, the live television broadcast was also a banner event for Hancock.[89] The anticipatory hype surrounding Jackson's *Thriller* album drove ratings for the Tuesday evening program to 43.8 million

[89] The awards show was held the night of February 28, 1984, at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles.

viewers, the largest audience in the show's history. On what was likely the biggest stage of his performing career, Hancock and his touring unit, The Rockit Band, stunned the crowd with a stage-show that ingeniously simulated many of the core elements of the "Rockit" video, shortly after which he won his first Grammy.[90] As a critic for *The New York Times* declared in a retrospective appreciation of Hancock's display that evening: "What nobody could have foreseen was that his performance would be a Grammy Moment, to use the Recording Academy parlance, of rare cultural impact—one of the most stealthily influential in the history of the awards."[91] In addition to staging a handful of Whiting's robots live and in person, the show marked some of the first mainstream exposure for hip-hop expressions and styles, namely Grand Mixer D.ST.'s turntable manipulations and a surprise session of breakdancing. The event was also significant in that Hancock was at the center of the choreographed chaos, an arrangement that refused to tiptoe around earlier concerns about how race might be cause for rejection of his work. By putting Hancock, and by extension an affirming representation of racial Blackness, in the limelight, the show also offered a latent disruption of the anxious, normalizing sense of Whiteness that pervaded Godley and Creme's video.

The short but jam-packed segment opens with soft rock singer John Denver sketching Hancock's musical bonafides in the classical and jazz genres. His emphatic introduction gave no hint that what was about to transpire would demonstrate a very different scope of musical and performative dexterity. As the live feed cut from Denver

[90] Clips of Hancock's performance, including his acceptance speech are usually available on YouTube. See "Herbie Hanckok Rockit Live on 1984 Grammy Award," YouTube video, 7:48, from a performance televised by CBS on February 28, 1984, posted by "Sergio Luna," August 18, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQMU-Paa7sc.
[91] Nate Chinen, "Two Turntables and a Keytar: The Night Herbie Hancock Rocked the Grammys," *The New York Times*, February 8, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/09/arts/music/grammys-herbie-hancock-rockit.html.

to the stage, the initial shots reveal a symmetrical set with the band members, including two drummers, a guitarist and a keyboard player, on risers. D.ST. and his dual turntable set-up are at the center of this arrangement. Directly in front of him is a bed resembling Whiting's wanking man sculpture. Meanwhile, the flailing legs of *Pervy Men* dangle overhead. For this occasion, their black slacks have been exchanged for stark white suit pants (fig. 27). More Whiting assemblages are scattered across the stage along with a quartet of automatons in uniform gray suits, floppy brown wigs, and white masks and gloves. These figures act out wanton acts from the "Rockit" video that are instantly recognizable. As one pair recreates the repetitive head slapping from the kitchen scene, another remains locked in place, slowly swiveling back and forth as if a mannequin on display. The fourth figure parrots the solitary mechanistic humping of the wanking man, albeit in a restrained fashion replete with head jerking but reduced pelvis thrusting.

In contrast to the bit role that he played in his video, Hancock was directly involved in the moving parts of this hectic performance. He immediately stood out as a kind of twentieth century rocketeer in white pants and polished silver chainmail shirt topped with a black leather flight jacket and red bandana. He was also readily identified by his low-slung Davis Clavitar, a strange-looking instrument that still registers as a kooky merger of keyboard and guitar (fig. 28). Hancock is the lead performer in this spectacle, which is evidenced in the way the camera tracks and focuses on him, but he very much plays along with members of the larger ensemble. In the opening sequence, he serenades a torsoless pair of nude women's mannequin legs strutting along a semicircle. This sense of relationality with the robots, or perhaps it is a matter of cheeky curiosity on Hancock's part, continues throughout the song; for example, at one point he stares at the

wanking man, after which he offers a quizzical but knowing shrug to the audience and camera. Although at points some of the performers and figures seem to upstage Hancock, particularly D.ST.'s record cutting and the group of four suited figures who would eventually play outsized roles in the show, he is always physically and sonically present.

The performance rapidly accomplished a flurry of visual stimuli, both for the live audience and viewers at home. The latter group was also confronted with a riot of camera angles on the action, along with a bevy of cuts that did not equal the editing feats of the video but nevertheless mounted a comparable sense of tension. Unlike the video, in which a peculiar act of destruction finally releases that pressure, the live act crescendos with an astonishing dance sequence and then reaches a triumphant climax. Just after the halfway mark, the camera lingers on D.ST. executing his emblematic scratch on the vocoded "fresh." The audience erupts into loud cheers, not for the DJ on screen, but for the four gray-suited automatons that have been revealed as live dancers behind Hancock ripping through synchronized popping moves and brief backward glide steps. After forming into a loose circle, the breakers toprock and then drop into kinetic floor moves. While surrounded by fast-orbiting bodies with legs and feet akimbo, Hancock launches into a fleeting keyboard solo spanning less than ten seconds before the music and dancing snaps to a halt. He basks in the moment with his hands held high and eyes gazing up.

While the performance announced Hancock's arrival in the pop landscape, the four breakdancers performed a latent, more discordant intimation about representations of racial Whiteness. Hancock quips in his memoir that "Robots turning human was some seriously hip shit."[92] The reveal of the figures ratcheting from mechanical movements into full-blown breaking was an astonishing gimmick, but a more complicated disclosure

[92] Hancock, 246.

occurred when the dancers removed their white masks at the conclusion. At that moment, the camera angle cuts off the view of a dancer on stage left. Of the remaining three, one turns out to be a young Black man. This admission recasts what has just transpired as involving partial shades of racial masquerade, specifically a Black performer temporarily inhabiting the normative White subject position that governed the automatons' existence. Even if this was an unintended effect, the performance echoes what scholar Marvin McAllister has identified as a longstanding tradition of whiteface minstrelsy that often served to "satirize, parody, and interrogate privileged or authoritative representations of whiteness."[93] As McAllister observes, this performance mode, which entails the appropriation of White costume, social privileges and gestures, is generally not so much a means to denigrate White bodies but rather to destabilize "the ordering principles of America's racial and cultural hierarchies."[94]

In line with how Whiting's sculptures divulged an array of neuroses that played out behind closed doors, the dancers amplify those libidinal tendencies and then disrupt them. Their imitations of Whiting's automations also aped the look and actions of white-collar businessmen, a social position more often occupied by White men that continues to enjoy tremendous financial power and social cache.[95] In effect, their re-creation parodied that rank, exposing it as riven with machinic violence and erotic self-absorption. Though this is the stuff of hyperbole, it applied pressure on the symbolic markers that have so typically been associated with racial Whiteness and its ostensible authority. The dramatic

[93] Marvin McAllister, *Whiting Up: Whiteface Minstrels & Stage Europeans in African American Performance* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 1.
[94] McAllister points out that "whiting up" stands in contrast to how blackface minstrelsy "was predicated on a privileged whiteness and a debased blackness." See McAllister, 5, 11.
[95] By this time, a distinctly 1980s iteration of the White, oversexed, marauding Wall Street financier trope was taking shape in the Hollywood imagination. For example, *Trading Places* (John Landis, 1983) and *Wall Street* (Oliver Stone, 1987).

shift to breakdancing, a performance practice associated with Black and Latino youth, rendered the satire in disorienting relief; the dancers were not only playing at robots, they were also playing at the human figures the robots stereotypically represented. Transposing on to the Black body some of the accepted signs and meanings of moneyed White male subjects also troubled their deeply sedimented yet fundamentally unstable place in the American social order. The double lives, as it were, of the dancers implicitly gestured to how the broader hierarchies of race, and identity itself, were in flux, particularly at that historical moment. In contrast to very real forces that maintained the ostensible fixity of race, for example, MTV's programming practices, this dimension of the "Rockit" show attested to how ripe American popular media was for transformation.

The live performance was also significant in that it offered an entertaining but frank reply to lingering notions that Black performers might be hazardous entities that did not belong as features in popular media. The event marked a moment in which Hancock could be front and center, not subject to a mode of erasure out of concern that his race would assault White viewers and subsequently set back his career. Again, this is not to reduce Hancock to only Blackness, but rather to reflect on the sorts of racist conditions that indelibly shaped his audiovisual representation in that historical era. The "Rockit" show is important for its refusal to compromise, conceal or marginalize the visual traces of the central Black performers, at least for its short display. Further, the performance offered an affirmation of a Black expressive culture that was proving to be life altering for many young people who were ordinarily ignored when not demonized by broader mainstream American culture. In showcasing D.ST. and the breakdancers, Hancock's "Rockit" moment at the Grammys threw an important symbolic support behind aspiring

hip-hoppers. As the legendary breakdancer Crazy Legs once reflected, "The fact that an artist of Herbie Hancock's stature embraced and reached out to the hip-hop community and brought it into his world, I think that was a nice shot in the arm for hip-hop."[96]

"Everybody, it's a future shock"

> The tone of this music is that of kitsch, and when Herbie calls his record "Future Shock" one can only assume he was having a sly joke. The irony is, of course, that the record tells us more about 1983 than it does any crassly considered "future."[97]
>
> — Lynden Barber, "Cultured Shocks"

Although Columbia had slated an album of new Hancock material, given the breakout success of "Rockit," the company rushed to put out a full-length release.[98] In a way, an accelerated timetable was fitting, as it matched some of the sentiment of the subsequent title, *Future Shock*, which evoked the impression of a tremor rippling back through time toward the present moment. The iconic gridded wave undulating across the album cover amplified prospects of the future as poised to engulf the here and now of the late twentieth century. But by 1983, the notion of "future shock" was already something of a recent rhetorical relic, having been popularized a decade earlier by the futurist critic Alvin Toffler, who took the phrase for the title of his best-selling book. In 1970 Toffler wrote of the globe as beset by a form of pathology—future shock—stemming from a widespread inability to adapt to rampant technological changes wrought in the super-industrial age.[99] A primary concern was that as the future encroached on the present,

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[96] Fernando Jr.
[97] Lynden Barber, "Cultured Shocks: Herbie Hancock Future Shock," *Melody Maker*, August 20, 1983, 24.
[98] Hancock does not address Columbia's stalling in his memoir, but states his manager, David Rubinson asserted the company "came very close to refusing to release *Future Shock*." See Hancock, 240. My claim is based on a conversation with David Em, the artist whose work appears on the front cover. He recounted to me how Columbia's executives were in such a hurry to get the album to market that they did not finalize a deal in advance for his artwork. David Em (artist) in discussion with the author, January 21, 2016.
[99] Toffler debuted the concept of "future shock" in a 1965 magazine article as a way of elaborating "the shattering stress and disorientation that we induce in individuals by subjecting them to too much change in

traditional ways of being and ties with the past were being annihilated. Alongside Toffler's incipient dread about historical detachment, Hancock mobilized the idea of future shock as a pithy, marketable title, and, more importantly, as a bridge with an existing continuum of Black musical style and cultural critique. In 1983, he admitted to having a casual knowledge of Toffler's text but argued he was more interested in how its core concept might compel critical thought about lived, human experience: "I thought the name really fitted the music in this album. But I'm mainly concerned with the human element, and that more attention be given to human beings. I'm *fascinated* with computer technology; but I'm involved with people."[100] In line with the oblique qualities of "Rockit," Hancock's approach to "future shock," both in its album and song forms, constituted a multifaceted concept that stealthily reflected a rich synthesis of claims about the state of technology, social change and the experience of racial Blackness.[101]

Though Toffler's work was a well-trod cultural touchstone by the early 1980s, Hancock had a different reference point from the past decade: Curtis Mayfield's "Future Shock," the lead single from the soul and funk artist's 1973 album, *Back to the World*. In covering the song, Hancock tapped directly into a rich musical vein of trenchant social critique, tacitly staking a claim that for many Black people, the conditions of the 1980s

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too short a time." By 1970 he had fleshed out his theory, arguing the "malady" entailed both physical and psychological distress stemming from "overstimulation" that accompanied the acceleration of change in the twentieth century. See Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), 2, 326, and Alvin Toffler, "The Future as a Way of Life," *Horizon*, Summer 1965, 108-115.

[100] Of Toffler's work, Hancock said: "Well, so far I've only flipped through it myself. But I'm familiar with what it's saying: that the electronic computer world is moving so fast that it's difficult to take it all in—though computers themselves may help us assimilate the outflow of information." See May, "Programmed for Change," 28.

[101] A handful of musicians took up the concept of future shock in the early 1980s, but Hancock's iteration was the most well-known. Jazz bassist Stanley Clarke included a song with the same title on his *Time Exposure* album in 1984. Clarke's take, a breezy funk track, refers to the dangers of technology as a conceit to warn about the risks, i.e. shocks, of getting into a romantic relationship. The same year, electro rapper Captain Rock released "Capt. Rock to the Future Shock" (1984), a vocoder-driven party jam that bore a resemblance to Afrika Bambaataa's "Planet Rock" anthem but with a less regimented, sillier sensibility.

were part of a longer historical trajectory. It would have been difficult for Hancock to have found a better source of inspiration, as Mayfield had long been celebrated as a voice of political consciousness for Black America. His work with The Impressions from the 1960s, records such as "Keep on Pushing" (1964), "People Get Ready" (1965), and "We're a Winner" (1967), provided musical soundtracks for the modern Civil Rights Movement.[102] These affirmative statements gave way to piercing calls for racial justice, for example, the lyrical address of how Black people had "paid" into the American project via the violence and forced labors of slavery in "This Is My Country" (1968).

Mayfield loosely oriented *Back to the World* around a new range of tensions, in particular the disorienting experiences of soldiers returning from the war in Vietnam. As the title track narrates, they escaped disaster abroad only to be confronted by poor treatment and ruinous conditions at home in America. The song never explicitly mentions the dynamics of race, but the lyrics allude to contradictions Black soldiers encountered, for example, a mother tells her son about the unfinished business of civil rights: "And now that you're back and done, let me tell you son / The war was never won."[103] The lead single, "Future Shock," continued in this vein, riffing on Toffler's speculations to diagnose the threats of ongoing environmental catastrophe and everyday oppression, much of which had an asymmetric bearing on the lives of Black people. In contrast to the latent hyperbole that pervaded Toffler's text, the song lyrics worked in a more plainly stated descriptive mode. Mayfield reports scenes from the ground—mothers waiting on

[102] As one critic put it, Mayfield "staked his claim as the first commercial black artist to write lyrics that were also political statements." See Chris Salewicz, "Keep on Pushing: Curtis Mayfield," *Face*, August 1983, http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/keep-on-pushing-curtis-mayfield. Also see Craig Werner, "Curtis Mayfield," *Goldmine*, July 4, 1997, http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/curtis-mayfield-2.
[103] Curtis Mayfield, "Back to the World," *Back to the World*, Curtom CRS 8015, 1973, 33 1/3 rpm.

the soup line, fathers who are worn out from life, people "with nothing to eat," lovers in jail, men "messing up the land"—not so much to prophesize but to clarify the stakes of the moment and the need for a greater sense of urgency.[104] As the chorus states three times over, "This is our last and only chance." Such an accounting of 1970s America perhaps spoke to a generalizable state of being across the nation, but it was clear that Mayfield was concerned with future shocks faced by Black citizens. The album's cover foregrounded this point, as it featured a collage illustration by Gary Wolkowitz of Black figures, largely young men, superimposed with threats such as fighter jets, hypodermic needles, rats and poverty (fig. 29). For Hancock, Mayfield's "Future Shock" did not simply provide a thematic vehicle that resonated with his increasingly technology-driven musical preoccupations. The song also enabled a trenchant, shrewd address of concerns that were becoming more pronounced a decade later.

As Richard Grabel of *New Musical Express* put it in his review of Hancock's album: "The title track is a Curtis Mayfield cautionary tale that sounds even more timely now than it did when Mayfield sang it in the early '70s."[105] This was amplified by the decision to leave Mayfield's lyrics intact for the cover version, which maintained a sense of continuity between the two historical eras. Though the Vietnam War and its fallout at home was no longer a central concern of the day, the early 1980s was yet another fraught moment for Black Americans, particularly as a domestic conflict was in full swing. By 1983, the Reagan Administration had escalated a rapid war of political attrition, dismantling established Civil Rights-era legislative measures meant to ensure more equitable ways of life. The methodical slashing and burning of civic and social resources

[104] Curtis Mayfield, "Future Shock," *Back to the World*, Curtom CRS 8015, 1973, 33 1/3 rpm.
[105] Richard Grabel, "Hancock's Half Power," *New Musical Express*, August 20, 1983, 31.

had asymmetric impacts for many Black, Latino and poor communities, particularly as such coordinated disinvestment coincided with the arrival of crack cocaine and an accompanying harsh, "law-and-order" approach to policing. Lyrics addressing the onset of poverty, families split apart by incarceration, and the contradiction of illegal narcotics as more affordable than the bare necessities of food, rang disturbingly true ten years after they were penned. The song further compounded a sense of urgency for the late twentieth century with its cataloging of emotional tolls. Phrases such as "so afraid, afraid, afraid," "no love for his brother," and "everyone's alone," registered palpable impressions of social alienation.[106] At a moment when many Black Americans were embattled, Hancock's return to "Future Shock" offered an acknowledgement that a renewed version of longstanding racial antagonisms was advancing.[107] The war was never won.

In addition to describing desultory conditions, "Future Shock" offered incisive analysis of an associated social disconnect, pinpointing how racialized concerns were misunderstood or simply glossed over, even when Black performers put them front and center in their work. In the song's second verse, Mayfield called out what he observed as troubling responses to *Super Fly* (Gordon Parks, Jr., 1972), a popular Blaxploitation film released the previous year for which he had contributed an acclaimed soundtrack. The first four lines of the verse identify how some audiences tended to engage only the more entertaining qualities of the film and his music:

> Our worldly figures
> Playin' on niggers
> Oh see them dancin'

[106] Mayfield, "Future Shock."
[107] It is worth noting that Mayfield still performed through the 1980s and commented on life under Reagan. As *Face* reported: "Reaganomics, Curtis believes, has ensured there is not too great a difference between growing up in the USA as a young black in the '40s and '50s and growing up there today. Certainly, he says, 'for quite a few' life is better, but for the majority these are still hard times." See Salewicz.

See how they're dancin' to the superfly[108]

Super Fly and its music may scan as paeans to a fictional neighborhood hero Youngblood Priest, a debonair cocaine dealer in New York City, but for Mayfield their true purpose was to elaborate the environmental traps that circumscribed such a life. As danceable as his "Superfly" (1972) tune may have been, it was designed to be a message song, an admonitory story that implicitly pointed to the inequities that made selling drugs a socially viable, and enviable, vocation. A year after its release, Mayfield opined that this dispatch about life in Black America was lost on listeners, reduced to a dance fad.

Though the singer's audience was in large part Black, the lyrics are ambiguous when it comes to their target subject, i.e. "our worldly figures," especially when heard in relationship to the lines that followed:

> Ooh, ain't it dumb
> When you don't know where we're comin' from
> Dancin' in our youth
> Cryin' at the truth
> To get over, over, over, get over[109]

These lyrics land as a kind of perennial rebuke of young Black people to see through the surface glamour of characters like Priest and to better understand the sorts of histories that have shaped Black life in America. The closing lines of the verse speak to the complications endemic to that position, the simultaneities of pleasure ("dancin' in our youth") and sorrow ("cryin' at the truth") that undergird both a song such as "Superfly" and the experience of striving to survive and succeed by whatever means necessary.

The "our worldly figures" lyric also implies a wider delivery, namely to mainstream White audiences.[110] This is evident in the way Mayfield slips between

[108] Mayfield, "Future Shock."
[109] Ibid.

positions of belonging and separation. The initial "our" suggests the surrounding social hierarchy of America, which for all intents and purposes, was governed by racial Whiteness. Mayfield sees "*them* dancing" before switching to the more direct address of "*you* don't know where *we're* comin' from" [emphasis mine]. Again, the baseline concern is that listeners missed the bigger point about the work.[111] A further implication is that touristic understandings and reveling in Black popular culture by White listeners does not adequately engage the lived conditions that contribute to such expressions. "Dancin' to the superfly" is a paltry substitute, if not a treacherously entertaining alibi, to avoid grappling with the song's stated claims. Such skewed celebration and subsequent misunderstandings of how Black life gets structured and experienced in America comprises a mode of disconnect that only abets continued anti-Black treatment.

As the lyrics unpack this disconnect, the song also develops a sense of conflict through its sonic qualities, most notably in the tension between the quirky funk of the music and the delivery of the vocals. The lead singers, Mayfield on the original and Dwight Jackson, Jr., on the Hancock cover, both mobilize a concerted falsetto.[112] Mayfield's track was in many regards an extension of his recent hit "Superfly," but adapted around a springy guitar riff and an open arrangement that interspersed short blurts from the horns and keening guitar laments over syncopated drums with a light

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[110] In reviews of *Back to the World*, music critics tend to mention this verse as one of the album's defining statements. As it stands, it is not clear if Mayfield had a specific demographic or listener in mind. One of his sons, Todd Mayfield, offers a short address of their ambiguity, stating, "That line could have been a simple shout-out to his previous work or a searing comment to his listeners about missing the message behind the lyrics of his most famous album as they ate up the dance beats." See Todd Mayfield, *Traveling Soul: The Life of Curtis Mayfield*, with Travis Atria (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2017): 240.

[111] There is anecdotal evidence to support Mayfield's claim. As critic Dave Marsh stated in 1972, a common response from White Americans was *Super Fly* "glorifies drugs, decadence and violence." In effect, such assessments missed the critique that laced the movie and soundtrack. See Dave Marsh, "Black Music," *Let It Rock*, May 1973, http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/black-music.

[112] Singer Bernard Fowler, formerly of The Peech Boys, has come to be associated with Hancock's "Future Shock," perhaps owing to his many performances during live shows and tours as part of The Rockit Band. On the record, the lead vocals are credited to Jackson, while Fowler is noted as the back-up vocalist.

touch. Against this verdant funk, Mayfield, compresses his vocals, not to the point of straining yet pushing toward an unnatural register.[113] A similar effect ensues in the cover version, as Jackson performs what sounds like an exaggerated interpretation of Mayfield's falsetto, entering a range that mixes expectations about the gender of the singer. The music on Hancock's adaptation is heavier with big, full synthesizer chords and stripped-down percussion patterns that lose some of the syncopation of the original, but retains a sense of the song's spikey quirkiness with Hancock's near constant gurgles on the clavinet and noisy guitar solos. With both versions, the high-pitched vocals do not sound out of place against the wider palettes of off-kilter and electronic funk, yet they ring as clarion calls, stretching the sonic characters of the tracks.

The piercing sound of this singing method contains the potential for a profound political engagement. In the case of "Future Shock," the vocals can be understood to generate musical tension and transmit discernible suggestions of the necessities for a transformed future. Their borderline unrecognizable, alien tones signal aspirations for what is not yet possible in the contemporary moment. As scholar Anne-Lise François argues, the otherworldly qualities of the falsetto are what animate the overtly political content of Mayfield's song, rendering its urgencies in stark, proleptic terms.[114] Despite a highly performative delivery, the register evinces little irony or play. Instead, this is the

[113] Mayfield had previously sung in a high-pitched style, but "Future Shock" marks a lasting shift in his delivery. Todd Mayfield notes that after the song, his father used falsetto "almost exclusively, seldom dipping down into his natural register." A similar change occurred with Mayfield's music, which shifted from a deeper bass foundation to a punchier, less robust sound overall. See Mayfield, *Traveling Soul* 240.
[114] François's work generatively reevaluates falsetto technique, specifically its role in sorely misunderstood formations of racial identities and unrecognized pursuits of political agency that occur in disco and soul of the late 1970s. Her description of the "foreignness" of Mayfield's voice is especially insightful, as she writes: "It breaks out as something never yet heard, and this 'unheard of' quality is less a way of 'doing' racial otherness than of bearing testimony to the unrealized, otherwise unrecognized, potential Mayfield sees being wasted on the streets." See Anne-Lise François, "Fakin' It/Makin' It: Falsetto's Bid for Transcendence in 1970s Disco Highs," *Perspectives of New Music*, no. 33 (Winter 1995): 444-445.

only suitable vocal route that Mayfield, and subsequently Jackson, had to communicate the stakes of what was currently unfolding in many Black communities—and would continue to unfold unless some sort of change was undertaken. As François puts it:

> It might be said that he [Mayfield] can't help but sing in falsetto. … In a world where "the price of meat is higher than the dope on the street," there is no choice but to sing in the register of the other (world). Falsetto is the only way to make oneself heard in a world which is already a lie—the white-owned world which is also that of one's suffering community.[115]

When confronted by the ongoing ravages of that "lie," the willful misunderstandings and fantasies that legislate White privilege and Black suffering, one recourse is to engage what is inherently an imaginative, speculative mode. As much as the content describes scenes of distress, the uncanny aurality of Mayfield and Jackson's high-pitched voices broadcasts a sense of exigency to stem and remedy such torment. The falsetto delivery, perhaps even because of its kitsch associations, proposes a different meaning for the "future shock" term, in this case, creative forces that press upon the boundaries of what seems impossible and announce lived conditions and ways of being that could arrive.

Approach

As Hancock's title track was calibrated to project an aural sense of where the future could be headed, the associated look and design of his album brought the notion of an exploratory, technologically enhanced way of life into direct view. The cover art derived from a Cibachrome print of a computer-generated image entitled *Approach* (1979) by the artist David Em (fig. 30). Both the visual and its title were fitting, as the work rendered contact with a surreal spacescape. One might imagine this was a cockpit perspective from a rocket silently soaring at low altitude over a newly discovered planet

[115] François, 444.

while a lunar satellite hovers just above the horizon. The firmament is jet-black and starless, a vacuum that drives attention to the contours below. A cresting lattice of bent cerulean panels slopes across the foreground. The quadrangles of the grid are edged in red, white and neon blue, bioluminescent bands that pulse into the distance. Between the wave and the horizon lies a fluid plane of swirling color with concentrations of azure hues bleeding from aqua into magenta and mustard swatches. The ascetic composition highlights the scene's impression of depth—this is a three-dimensional world through which one could move—and the textures of its surfaces. Whether sea or land (or perhaps some other alien mass), the contrasting bodies are defined by their electric, finely chiseled details, which are unmistakably recognizable as electronically generated.[116] When taken on its own, the cover is devoid of any mention of race, let alone humankind. The small hand-written text jogged along the top edge is the lone identifier that this is a Hancock record. The decision to not feature him was taken by some as yet another effort to soft-pedal his Blackness.[117] Yet, when *Approach* and its provenance are observed in dialogue with Hancock's approaches to technology and the musical statement of "Future

[116] The qualities of depth and texture, Em's hallmarks from the late-1970s to the mid-1980s, are often noted as distinguishing his work from that of other artists working with computers. As one writer suggested in an appraisal of Em's body of work in 1981: "It is his fascination with texture that sets his art uniquely apart, since most image synthesis being done elsewhere is currently lacking in richness of texture." See Peter Sorensen, "Computer Images: An Apple for the Dreamsmiths," *Cinefex*, October 1981, 14.

[117] Indeed, this was a point of debate among Hancock and the trumpeter Wynton Marsalis in 1985. For Hancock, the cover was a calculated decision to avoid turning off potential listeners, and alongside the "Rockit" video, helped reach markets that had been closed to Black performers: "And so I said to myself, 'How can I get this record exposed as quickly to the white kids as to the black kids? … I'm not on the cover of most of my records. What I care about is whether the cover looks good or not." Marsalis regarded this as pandering, as indicated by his comment, "If you cheese enough they'll make you president" (the transcript also notes Marsalis visibly winced at Hancock's remarks). As an aside, in the years prior to *Future Shock*, Hancock featured prominently in covers for major releases. For example, *Magic Windows* (1981), *Sunlight* (1978), *V.S.O.P.* (1977), *Secrets* (1976), and *Thrust* (1974) all offered some variation on his personal image. See Rafi Zabor and Vic Garbarini, "Wynton vs Herbie: The Purist And The Crossbreeder Duke It Out," *Musician*, March 1, 1985, 60.

Shock," it seems that Em's image of a fantasy world might help manifest an implicit suggestion of inspiration for some Black listeners.

With Em, Hancock encountered a kindred spirit, an artist who was also deeply committed to pursuing emergent technologies as vehicles for creative expression.[118] As Em recounted, Hancock was searching for a cover that gelled with his current electronic sound and would have an immediate visual impact that signified how he—and listeners—were headed "out there."[119] These imperatives matched the sensibilities that drove Em's work, including his desire to investigate "uncharted territory" and "expand human consciousness" with the aid of computers.[120] In a quite literal way, Em was immersed in real-time efforts to explore outer space, as he created *Approach* while serving as artist-in-residence at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in Pasadena, California.[121] This position may have seemed unlikely, especially given that his background was rooted in the more traditional mediums of painting and sculpture. Early in his career, Em branched into constructing installation art and fabricating largescale immersive environments that he then lit and captured on film and video. This led to a fascination with audiovisual media that in turn morphed into a hunt for technologies to digitally synthesize visual images, regardless if such hardware had been designed for other sorts of operations.

[118] During my interview in 2016, Em did not recall the events that led to his association with Hancock, but he thought the connection likely came through David A. Ross, who was beginning his tenure as director of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, Massachusetts. Em's work was included in a group show in town (perhaps the *Timed and Spaced* show at Alchemie Gallery in February 1983) that Ross, who may have had ties to Hancock's manager, came to see. David Em (artist) in discussion with the author.
[119] David Em (artist) in discussion with the author.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Before landing at JPL, Em pursued hardware and software developments at The National Center for Experiments in Television in San Francisco, Xerox Research PARC in Palo Alto, and Information International, Inc., where he honed techniques for creating and editing digital images. For a detailed biography and discussion of his trajectory, see David Em, "A Note About My Work," in *The Art of David Em: 100 Paintings*, ed. Charles Miers (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988), 14-20.

During his tenure at JPL from the late-1970s to the mid-1980s, Em worked in all-night sessions on the same super-computers that NASA scientists used during the day. Those engineers and researchers mobilized the increased computing power of the latest machines to process video imagery sent back to Earth from deep space and to simulate planetary flybys, in part to understand how spacecraft and equipment moved in space.[122] Meanwhile, Em built imaginative worlds of his own, electronic environments and designs that were in part fired by witnessing the initial photographs of Mars, Jupiter and Saturn that were beamed back to the installation from the Viking and Voyager missions in the mid-1970s. At times, such inspirational materials played a direct role in his art, as Em integrated data from the pictures as the basis for compositions, textures and contours of some of the territories he assembled.[123] In conjunction with the aesthetic influence of such "science fact," science fiction and comics books helped prime Em for his work at JPL. He specifically mentioned how *Los Supersabios*, a Mexican comic strip centered on a group of amateur scientists, helped make working in a research laboratory seem like a natural fit.[124] Within this unique mix of laboratory conditions and influences, Em generated work that spanned reality and creative invention. As he told a computer

[122] Em's time at JPL overlapped with the graphics pioneer David Blinn, who developed software to mock up animations of spaceflight around Jupiter and Saturn that were included in Carl Sagan's *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage* (1980) series. See Sorensen, "Computer Images: An Apple for the Dreamsmiths," 14.
[123] Cynthia Goodman describes the process: "His [Em] data bases contain outer space phenomena transmitted back to earth from Saturn or the Jovian moon. Em manipulates the available imagery with programs that enable him to simulate shadows, textures, and reflections. He can create compositions of incredible complexity by applying texture-mapping data from photographs of the surfaces of Saturn's moons to simple geometric shapes." See Cynthia Goodman, *Digital Visions: Computers and Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987), 113-114.
[124] *Los Supersabios* was created by the Mexican cartoonist Germán Butze and ran in a variety of formats from the mid-1930s until the late 1960s. The premise revolved around a trio of adventurers, two of whom were amateur scientists, who build unconventional equipment for an ongoing battle with a mad scientist. Further, Em has written of the "subliminal effect" of renowned comic artist Steve Ditko's work on Marvel's Doctor Strange character in the early 1960s, saying, "Dr. Strange's spells invoke supernatural forces that conjure rich visualizations of where magic can lead to: wondrous places and states of mind you can step right into." See David Em, "Steve Ditko's Dr. Strange," *David Em* (blog), Nov. 17, 2016, http://www.davidem.com/2016/11/17/steve-ditkos-dr-strange/.

graphics conference in 1982, he had designed "an underground kingdom," "creatures and creaturettes," "fantasy floral studies," and entire "galaxies."[125] Of this growing catalog of themes, the works that connected most with audiences were of three dimensional worlds in the vein of *Approach*, as the digital spaces and environments beckoned audiences to enter and move through them.[126] It seems that much of their appeal, both for Em and audiences, stemmed from the way they synthesized the fantastic realities of deep space, new computer technologies, and the imaginative.

Undergirding the enthusiasm for digital hardware and software that Hancock and Em shared was a non-deterministic philosophy. Rather than engage machines as they were intended to be used, they took a more flexible, exploratory approach. Against a discourse from the likes of Toffler that agonized over potentially dehumanizing effects of digital technologies, both artists regarded them as creative tools that were always already available to be adapted to human (and artistic) imperatives and with the potential for unexpected results. Em told *Popular Photography* in 1982: "I'm a lousy mechanic, too, but I can drive a car just fine—computers are just tools I use."[127] Though the devices at JPL demanded some technical knowledge, as Em grew accustomed to their ins and outs, he recognized opportunities that lay in unforeseen accidents, particularly "funny stuff in the code."[128] For example, he pointed to detailed idiosyncrasies in *Approach*, describing how small programming experiments gave rise to the curved lines of the iconic grid and the serrated rim of the lunar globe. In other works, Em built the increasingly complex textures and patterns of his "gem-like environments" by synthesizing various structures,

[125] Ted Nelson, "Smoothers of the Lost Arc," *Creative Computing*, March 1982, 90.
[126] David Em (artist) in discussion with the author.
[127] Natalie Canover, "Digital Dimensions," *Popular Photography*, August 1982, 80.
[128] David Em (artist) in discussion with the author.

i.e. data and programming elements, from different pieces through a repetitive process of constructing vortical chains of pictures within pictures.[129] These techniques attest to the intrinsic malleability of Em's materials—the zeros and ones of digital information—but also of his flexible attitude toward making art with new devices. Such inclinations were the visual equivalents of Hancock's musical approach in the early 1980s.

For Hancock, the increased manipulability of sound and the pleasures of repetition that computer-based instruments made possible were stepping stones toward new horizons of creative possibility. As his practice became more intertwined with synthesizers and programming, he was outspoken about what he saw as their innovative potentials, specifically in generating sounds and perspectives that had never been heard before. He explained to jazz critic Leonard Feather in 1983:

> You can take any sound, and even if it's a very short one like this (Hancock hit a glass on the table), if it's long enough to have any determinable pitch, you can find a certain point in its duration, extend it by putting a loop in it and create new sounds, actually play a chord with it. It may only be a few microseconds long, but through this technology, you can manipulate it. It's comparable to taking something under a microscope, blowing it up many times in size and finding new elements in it.[130]

In loose scientific terms, Hancock describes the inherent pliability and variability of digital sounds, processes that are very much at work in Em's pictures within pictures method. As Hancock argues, those operations, which are part and parcel of synthesizer instruments, enable musicians to discover new dimensions of existing sounds. The statement is also evidence of how he was likely to think in both sonic and visual terms. His concept of exploring ever finer nuances of sound casts the claims and sensibilities of Em's *Approach*, and by extension the *Future Shock* album, on a kind of telescoping

[129] Peter R. Sorensen, "Simulating Reality with Computer Graphics," *Byte*, March 1984, 122.
[130] Leonard Feather, "Hancock: Master of Electric Music," *Los Angeles Times*, May 29, 1983, R49.

continuum. Perhaps they are about moving outward toward the far reaches of unseen space. They simultaneously pursue an inward trajectory, evoking emergent spaces of the computer and digital variety. Whether they transmitted aspirations to reach the "out there" of the cosmos or to peel back the digital layers of some sort of inner technological environment, at that historical juncture the works presented sonic and visual challenges to imagine new worlds—and to hear and see from new perspectives.

Though *Approach* seemed to eschew any traces of humanity, when synthesized with the tenor of Hancock's music, the cover held implications for how race might be understood and lived in the late twentieth century. Yoking what were emergent, unmistakably Black musical expressions to such a lucid image of a computer-enabled futurescape projected a different trajectory for Black people. At one level, the image operated as an escape hatch; after all, who could blame besieged people for wanting to take flight from the increasingly dire conditions of the 1980s? But perhaps *Approach* was not as much about utter escapism as it was a speculative endeavor, one that broadcast aspirations for exploration and greater mobility in terrestrial places. Much like the way in which the falsetto of Mayfield and Jackson awaited liberation and ways of Black being that did not exist quite yet in social reality, the extraordinary digital mode of the image helped transmit real desires through the ordinary spaces of everyday life.

This is to argue that, as with the "Future Shock" song, the significance of Em's work was not just in the content of its imagined environment, but also in how it rendered space. The virtual dimensionality of its computer-generated facets—the way the piece synthesized a fantasy world in such a tactile, inviting way—articulated a sense of what was not yet possible. Gliding along at the border between the recognizable and the

unknown, the cover provided a kind of prototype for a world to be created. It was not that *Approach* offered a blueprint to racial liberation; it did not present solutions for anti-Black violence, grinding poverty or political neglect. Rather, it simulated impressions that something different might be conceivable. In a more concrete way, the image and the accompanying music encouraged listeners to take up new technologies to build new worlds. For many, this was a pipe dream, but the message nonetheless landed with animating force; for example, the enthusiasm of young hip-hoppers who wielded music hardware in creative, unintended ways in the wake of "Rockit." *Future Shock* offered an inspirational validation of such Black cultural expressions, both of the immediate present and the past. As such, the use of *Approach* was a tacit visual response to the cultural blindness and negligence that Mayfield's "Future Shock" lyrics decried, i.e. concerns that Black life in America and its histories were willfully misunderstood. Hancock may not have fully comprehended what was happening with underground hip-hop culture, but he recognized its energy and potential. His experiments with its expressions offered an affirmation and a challenge to ride them to new places other people would never expect.

"The Future Will Never Be the Same"?

> Just because I'm so interested in the future, it doesn't mean I'm giving up any skills I've acquired in the past.[131]
>
> — Herbie Hancock, as quoted in the *Los Angeles Times*

Nearly ten months after Columbia began the initial *Future Shock* marketing campaign, the company ran another full-page ad in the May 5, 1984 issue of *Billboard* celebrating the global commercial achievements of Hancock's album and the "Rockit"

[131] Feather.

single (fig. 31).[132] The original slogan, "The Future Will Never Be The Same," was reduced to smaller type in exchange for a new bold headline, "The Shock Heard 'Round the World." More notable was how the earlier graphic violence of a shattering Earth had been replaced by a bevy of congratulatory text and three action shots of Hancock palling around with one of Jim Whiting's googly-eyed machines. In less than a year, he had been positioned as both a hidden, potentially hazardous figure and an outstanding marketable persona. After twenty-two years in the business, Hancock did not hesitate to build on this new success, expanding in part by refusing to stick to one genre or medium. He released two more albums that were produced by Material and fronted by David Em artworks, *Sound-System* (1984) and *Perfect Machine* (1988).[133] In addition to recording and touring in support of the electro project, he maintained his footing in the more traditional jazz world with his revivalist V.S.O.P. quintet. He was also in demand as a film composer.[134] While a run at acting never blossomed, he gained screen time as the host of *Rockschool*, a public television series covering histories, techniques and instruments of popular musical styles for children (fig. 32).[135] Hancock was no longer a blue-tinted ghost in a machine but rather a household name, urbane yet with a tech-geek side that appealed to kids.

On one hand, this whiplash shift realized Hancock's leap to high-profile success, a rise that more Black performers achieved as the 1980s wore on. On the other, reaching that echelon unfairly propelled the violence of a counter-fantasy for some, as his emblematic status bolstered a false sense that all Black Americans had the economic or

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[132] See *Billboard*, May 5, 1984, 5.
[133] Detail from Em's *The Five of Us* (1983) appeared on *Sound-System*, while another detail from one of his most well-known works, *Trans Jovian Pipeline* (1979), fronted *Perfect Machine* (fig. 33 and fig. 34).
[134] Starting in the mid-1980s, Hancock had a prolific run writing for films, including scores for *A Soldier's Story* (Norman Jewison, 1984), *'Round Midnight* (Bertrand Tavernier, 1986), *Jo Jo Dancer, Your Life Is Calling* (Richard Pryor, 1986), *Colors* (Dennis Hopper, 1988) and *Harlem Nights* (Eddie Murphy, 1989).
[135] See "Hancock Expands Into Film Composing, Acting," *Variety*, January 2, 1985, 129-131; and John O'Connor, "'Rockschool' Explains Today's Popular Music," *The New York Times*, October 23, 1985, C22.

social wherewithal to pursue similar fates. As the "Future Shock" lyrics continued to pinpoint, America was beset by a chronic misunderstanding of Black life and its histories, a blindspot that abetted a maelstrom of political malpractice and a subsequent downward spiraling of conditions. As John E. Jacob of the National Urban League wrote in 1986:

> The signs of a nation moving toward a state of being permanently divided between the haves and the have-nots were plain to see over the past months, but all too few took the time or the trouble to look at them and comprehend their implications for the future. When it comes to the reality of how quickly much of Black America is losing ground in comparison to others, it would seem that much of America has put on blinkers.[136]

By revisiting Mayfield's song, Hancock offered a diagnosis of the conditions and psychic pressures of this predicament for Black people, including the dual affective weights of dancing and crying required to "get over," to survive. The song's concerns also uncannily mirrored the dilemma Hancock faced in configuring a music video to satisfy the MTV machine. Akin to the flawed celebration of *Super Fly*, perhaps some of the rosy praise for the "Rockit" video belied an inability, or willful refusal, to perceive, let alone understand, the video's strange violence toward Black bodies. In retrospect, the decision to cover "Future Shock" seems prescient, given how remarkable, and unfortunate, that its critiques remained so incisive ten years later. While, as Jacob suggests, much of America declined to consider the repercussions of its deepening racial divide, Hancock mobilized the past to speculate—and implicitly intervene—in how the future might evolve.

As the paradoxes of the moment unfurled, Hancock carried on his approach, returning to expressions from *Future Shock* as conceptual vehicles to blend utopian

[136] In looking back at 1985, Jacob argues that while the country generally rebounded from a recession, Black citizens "slipped further and further to the rear of the parade." He catalogs a poverty crisis; lack of access to education and employment, particularly for teens; the Reagan administration's "convoluted" approach to civil rights; and cuts to social services; among other antagonisms. See John E. Jacob, "An Overview of Black America in 1985," in *The State of Black America 1986,* ed. James D. Williams (New York: National Urban League, 1986): i-xi.

inclinations with affirmations of Black life. The initial follow-up salvo was "Hardrock" (1984), another furious electro track that sounded like an alternate take of "Rockit" but with the addition of screaming electric guitar. For Hancock, the similitude was intended as a bridge into the new African-inspired rhythmic and sonic palette he and Bill Laswell threaded through the remainder of the *Sound-System* album.[137] As with his earlier work, his earnest, perhaps utopian notions were still in tension with the lived circumstances of Blackness. This was clear four years later with throwback lyrical references in "Beat Wise" (1988). On that song, Leroy "Sugarfoot" Bonner of the legendary funk band Ohio Players snaps, "another future shock is just my lifestyle," before declaring:

> And I don't apologize for my lifestyle
> Word wise, if it seems uncivilized
> It's just my lifestyle in time[138]

Much like how "Future Shock" nodded to the difficult experiences of many Black lives, "Beat Wise" offered a defiant statement for people "standing on the block."[139] By 1988 the electronic edges of Hancock's music were showing hints of depreciation, but they still resonated with the arrival of the personal computing age. As such, the recurrent future shock motif synthesized the musical air of its contemporary moment while maintaining some aura of futurity. Yet, as with the tremors Hancock unleashed in 1983, these subsequent musical vibrations summoned the past as much as they performed worlds to come.

[137] See Gene Kalbacher, "Herbie Hancock," *Jazziz*, November/December 1984, 10.
[138] Herbie Hancock, "Beat Wise," *Perfect Machine*, Columbia FC 40025, 1988, 33 1/3 rpm.
[139] Ibid.

Chapter 3
Race as Special Effect: Michael Jackson, *Captain EO* and the Borders of the Cosmos

> Every generation creates its heroes, and their characteristics usually reveal as much about the culture which exalts them as of the heroes themselves.
>
> — Nelson George and Mark Rowland, *Musician*

> Slavery was a terrible thing, but when black people in America finally got out from under that crushing system, they were stronger. They knew what it was to have your spirit crippled by people who are controlling your life. They were never going to let that happen again.
>
> — Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk*

In the five-year lull between his record-breaking album *Thriller* (1982) and its much-anticipated follow-up, *Bad* (1987), Michael Jackson collaborated with a group of luminaries from the American entertainment industry that included directors Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas. The resulting film, entitled *Captain EO*, enjoyed a run at Disney theme parks from 1986 through the 1990s, and was trumpeted as an innovation in 4D technology for its fusion of 3D film and synchronized in-theater effects such as floor hydraulics, a fiber-optic light wall, lasers, fog, and a sound system heavy on subsonics. The seventeen-minute attraction was spectacular not only in its production team, audiovisual novelty, and utopian musical bombast, but also in its images of violence that echoes the practices of chattel slavery. Over the course of the story, the EO character, played by Jackson, and his "ragtag band" embark on a mission to liberate a junk planet ruled by the ghoulish Supreme Leader, played by Anjelica Huston. EO eventually unleashes his weapon: a musical "gift" that transmutes the planet from an oppressive world of slavery into an egalitarian, neoclassical paradise. The recovery process of this "world of despair" hinges around EO enduring assault by spear, whip, and electrocution,

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The epigraphs are taken from Nelson George and Mark Rowland, "Michael Jackson's Perfect Universe," *Musician*, July 1984, 46, and Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk*, rev. ed. (New York: Harmony Books, 2009): 279-280.

brutality that is depicted as cartoonish as it is shocking. Though the work is staged in a futuristic cosmos far, far away, it ultimately scans as a strange engagement with a more historical form of conflict that is both terrestrial and racialized.

This is to say that *Captain EO* refracts longstanding logics of anti-Blackness. As such, the attraction constitutes a lens through which to make out a series of phenomena including the allure of racialized violence in virtual form; a persistent inclination toward the obliteration of the Black subject; and a dream—or nightmare—of redemption that comes at the cost of asymmetric suffering. As it should become clear, the optics of this lens are as intentionally deceiving as the attraction's 4D apparitions. In the following chapter I concentrate on three primary lines of thought. The first tracks the maturation of Jackson's approach to musical advocacy and affinity for symbolic markers of unity, specifically in the years leading up to *Captain EO*. The second turns its full attention to the attraction, parsing its layers of violence that confront the viewer with a specific glance to their historical resonance.[1] The third traces the implications, the aftereffects of such violence, specifically in terms of how the 4D design forges a peculiar relationship between viewers and exhilarating cruelty. I ask, what notions about social transformation are activated in *Captain EO* and how, especially given the centrality of Black suffering?

My contention is that the audiovisual mechanics of the attraction coax the viewer into achieving some transient affect of that suffering, engage it as play, and then just as quickly disavow it as such, exchanging it for escapist optimism. The consequences run

[1] My analysis is based on multiple screenings of the "*Captain EO* Tribute" attraction in 2014 while it was still operating at Disneyland Park in Anaheim, California. This revival version, which opened at Disney parks shortly after Jackson passed in 2009, did not include all of the original in-theater effects, such as the fiber-optic wall of stars, lasers and smoke. These structural features were removed after the attraction was shuttered in 1997. The film was never commercially available, but bootleg versions, likely recordings from its only showing on network television (MTV aired a 2D version in the mid-1990s), and homemade ride-through videos are often available on YouTube.

deep though, as the attraction traffics in a flexible notion that past evils, whether of the film world or the reality of the viewer, can be easily redeemed. Race proves essential to executing these procedures, as *Captain EO* treats Blackness as one of the many tools of illusion in the attraction's arsenal, that is, as a kind of special effect. The sense of reassurance that results may be thrilling with all the strobe lights, bouncy bass lines and foot-stomping dance moves, but that feeling is only a fleeting sensation that absolves audiences of nothing. Instead, histories of racial violence and the material urgencies of social transformation are displaced from our reality, rendered ever further from our sight, hearing and touch.

The attraction's audiovisual machinations also serve to illuminate perplexing dynamics of race circulating in America during the 1980s. The implications of the attraction confirm what historian Manning Marable theorized as the "modern racial paradox" of the time: the contradictory ways in which systematic retreats by civic governments, coordinated economic disinvestment, and violent repression in Black communities progressed in sync with a growing celebration of Black cultural productions by mainstream America.[2] In integrating one of the world's most visible Black artists into the Disney fold, *Captain EO* could not help but function as a high-profile symbol of Black success (fig. 35). Economic prosperity was far from the realities of most people of color, yet the attraction and similar signs of individual achievement (*The Cosby Show*, Oprah Winfrey's media empire, the rise of Black superstar athletes) provided convenient alibis for the flourishing of an array of antagonisms toward Black life.[3] Such actions,

[2] Marable, 183-188, 213.
[3] Marable, 187. As John E. Jacob, president of The National Urban League succinctly wrote in 1984: "To many white Americans, the struggle of blacks is over." See Jacob, "An Overview of Black America in 1983," iii.

which included the Reagan administration's evisceration of the social welfare network and its sweeping offensive against established civil rights protections, hastened the contraction of a once growing Black middle class. Alongside an influx of crack cocaine in Black and Latino communities and escalating rates of violence, draconian law enforcement practices and sentencing guidelines gained traction, retrenching a racialized system of imprisonment that resembled Jim Crow.[4] These undertakings were abetted by visual and rhetorical aids circulating in mainstream media and the political establishment that served to demonize Black Americans, particularly youths, as threatening and depraved.[5] Contrary to a popular notion that all citizens somehow enjoyed substantive parity in terms of opportunities and social circumstances, race relations spiraled downward to what Marable characterized as a "new nadir."[6] Alongside this downward spiral, in its attempts to activate utopian desires for racial harmony *Captain EO* legislated treacherous misunderstandings of the lived experience of racial oppression in its present, past, and ultimately, its future.

"We Are Here to Change the World"

In the lead-up to *EO*, Jackson had become increasingly attracted to the potential of leveraging music to advance social causes.[7] His most recent project was writing and performing with producer Quincy Jones and singer Lionel Richie for what would become the most famous of the swath of message songs to be released in this era: "We Are the

[4] Alexander, 4.
[5] See Gray, 16-25.
[6] Marable, 183.
[7] By this time Jackson was also gaining a reputation for personal acts of charity, particularly donations and involvement with organizations that centered on children. See Steve Knopper, *MJ: The Genius of Michael Jackson* (New York: Scribner, 2015), 152-153.

World" (1985). The mawkish ballad, a collaborative venture spearheaded by singer-activist Harry Belafonte to fight famine in Ethiopia, assembled a star-studded line-up that ranged from Ray Charles to Cyndi Lauper to Bob Dylan.[8] This approach to musical advocacy was not an entirely new development for Jackson, particularly when it came to the issues of racial coalition and multicultural harmony. A through line runs from *EO*'s message of fostering a community that transcends difference to earlier creative statements. For example, the back cover of the *Destiny* (1978) album (fig. 36), one of the many group projects the Jackson family reunited for, attributed the following quote to Jackson and his brother Jackie: "Of all the bird family, the peacock is the only bird that integrates all colors into one, and displays the radiance of fire only when in love. We, like the peacock, try to integrate all races into one through the love of music."[9] The corporate marketing language of this statement effectively encapsulates the utopian earnestness of Jackson's belief in the potential curative powers of music and his hopes that integration might be forged through a common emotion. The accompanying image, a peacock with its sparkling plumage fully presented, further elaborates a growing preoccupation with symbolic markers of social change, in particular investments in displays of radiant energy and variations on rainbow arrays of color.

When observed against the prevailing cultural currents of the 1980s, such figurative rhetoric and imagery was not without its complications, particularly in light of

[8] The critical response to the project has often been ambivalent. Many critics have acknowledged the immense popularity of the song and the tens of millions of dollars it raised for humanitarian relief efforts while also pillorying the project for how it focused on celebrities rather than imparting much awareness about the situation in Ethiopia. Perhaps the strongest evidence for this critique includes the accompanying music video and videocassette release, which in large part scan as paeans to the celebrity singers and their ostensible cultural sensitivity. See Jaap Kooijman, "We Are the World: America's Dominance in Global Pop Culture," in *Fabricating the Absolute Fake: America in Contemporary Pop Culture* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 21-40.

[9] The Jacksons, *Destiny*, Epic JE 35552, 1978 33 1/3 rpm.

the growing allure (and political expediency) of racial colorblindness. This persistent discourse, which by this time had morphed from its original usage as a motivating argument against Jim Crow segregation, asserted that legal forms of equality had resulted in race no longer being a significant dynamic in the social circumstances of America.[10] For some, colorblindness may have resonated as an unfulfilled solution, a way of life to strive for. Its mobilization by conservative political elements amounted to a refusal to consider how race still played myriad roles in the exacerbation of longstanding social, political and economic disparities. Adherence to such an ideology not only failed to recognize continued systematic vulnerabilities for people of color, it also tacitly rendered the cumulative benefits of racial Whiteness as the given way of American life. Part of the ingenuity of these denials was that they often donned the charade of accepting, if not reveling in, racial and ethnic diversity, all the while overlooking how difference was a fulcrum on which continued inequality and injustice swung.

Regardless of his intentions, Jackson's passion for the peacock icon could not help but echo such fantasies. In addressing why he found the bird so inspiring, he connected his romantic impressions of its tail feathers to race relations, stating: "Some people we knew wondered what we meant when we talked about uniting all races through music—after all, we were black musicians. Our answer was 'music is color-blind.'"[11] Jackson renders the contention that music made by Black artists could only be for Black listeners a moot point. He declares that, instead, music provides a site for people of all identities to come together. As appealing as that might sound, his invocation of the

[10] See Brown, et. al., 2-3.
[11] See Jackson, 146-147. The phrase also proved popular with Afrika Bambaataa who stated in 1984: "To me, music is color-blind and universal." Both artists deploy the concept of colorblindness with a notable idealism—and perhaps naiveté about how those with competing ideological perspectives used the concept. See Hinckley.

colorblind term idealistically dispenses with the lived realities of how music—and people—come to be racialized. The crux is not that music should be blind to race, but rather open and aware of difference and its material implications.

Jackson's penchant for rainbow imagery also enjoyed a contemporary reference point with the "Rainbow Coalition," a term political activist Jesse Jackson deployed to describe the coalitional objectives of his organization Operation PUSH (People United to Save Humanity). By this time, PUSH had merged with the National Rainbow Coalition, a political group that emerged out of Jackson's 1984 presidential campaign. In attempting to bridge categories of race, age, religion, class, ability, and gender and sexual identity, Jackson sought a set of alliances that would counter the prevailing ideology of the Reagan administration. In contrast to the "trickle-down" ethos that disproportionately rewarded those who already occupied the top tiers of the American economic and social hierarchies, Jackson pursued a rainbow of "the rejected," a coalition of the dispossessed that might exert political force from the bottom-up.[12] For Jackson, this campaign emerged out of Black concerns—poverty, discrimination, despair—but he argued that such issues formed a foundation for solidarity rather than exclusivity from groups with similar experiences.[13] Further, the principles of such unions were rooted in the acknowledgement of how difference functioned as a political dynamic, rather than flattening lived experiences via a colorblind mode. As Sheila D. Collins describes:

> If the separate sectoral movements could see past the artificial barriers that kept them apart, and come to respect the specificities of each others' sense of betrayal by the dominant system, they would discover that they had become a "class for

[12] Sheila D. Collins, *The Rainbow Challenge: The Jackson Campaign and the Future of U.S. Politics* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1986), 83.
[13] See Linda Williams and Lorenzo Morris, "The Coalition at the End of the Rainbow, The 1984 Jackson Campaign," in *Jesse Jackson's 1984 Presidential Campaign: Challenge and Change in American Politics*, ed. Lucius J. Barker and Ronald W. Walters (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 229.

> itself" with the power—at least in numbers—to change the system that was oppressing all of them.[14]

Though holding together such a diverse spate of concerns was often an unwieldy task, the rainbow concept proved to be a galvanizing sign in this historical moment.[15]

The shared rainbow iconography was not lost on music critics of the time. Nelson George and Mark Rowland opened their 1984 profile of Michael Jackson in *Musician* magazine with a discussion of Jesse Jackson's political platform. They succinctly pinpointed a central impediment in asking, "How can a black man unite an America that denies its own mulatto personality?"[16] The critics weighed the "rainbow coalition" in pessimistic terms, arguing the reigning philosophy of free-market capitalism and an accompanying "nostalgia for a white bread past," dynamics perfectly embodied by Ronald Reagan, made for conditions of impossibility for a Black man to achieve the presidency, let alone unite America.[17] In contrast, George and Rowland saw Michael Jackson's popularity as a hopeful symptom that dreams of coalition might not be so futile. Though his preference for rainbow symbols carried all the superficial weight of a public relations campaign, perhaps his diffusion throughout the American cultural imaginary signaled an unrecognized potential for the country's fracturing race relations.

Yet, the writers also observed how the Jackson phenomenon served to further confuse that "mulatto personality" of America; it implicitly aligned with a larger cultural

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[14] Sheila D. Collins, 84.
[15] Collins details complications that arose among various bands of the rainbow; for example, splits with feminist constituencies over sexist remarks by Jackson. See Sheila D. Collins, 192. Linda Williams and Lorenzo Morris argue that Jackson's 1984 campaign was ultimately undone by race and racism. Both the political establishment and the media consistently regarded him as an outsider, i.e. he was "a horse of a different color." Further, though Jackson generated unexpected support from White voters, polls showed there was widespread skepticism among this constituency that America was ready for a Black president. See Williams and Morris, 236-238.
[16] George and Rowland, 44.
[17] Ibid.

tendency toward denying difference. For George and Rowland, much of Jackson's rise to iconic status relied on audiences interacting with his persona as a kind of cipher: "In Michael all ends meet—black/white, male/female, exotic/wholesome, adult/child, entertainer/recluse, sex/Jehovah's Witness, even Katharine Hepburn/Brooke Shields. He's like the universal solvent—one size fits all."[18] Despite the inclusive veneer of this solution, the metaphor of Jackson as "solvent" describes an operation that functions in contradistinction to the coalitional suggestions of the rainbow symbol. Jackson's public character provided infinite dimensions for listeners to identify with, yet in doing so it obscured those distinctions. In following George and Rowland, a diverse assembly of people may have gathered around the artist, but the result was an undifferentiated mass; the "universal solvent" may have dissolved differences rather than acknowledging and collectivizing them.

Perhaps the artist's more successful moves toward racial integration occurred when he focused less on marketing symbols, and, in a manner of speaking, let the music do the talking. By 1986 he had been credited with puncturing MTV's early commitment to not programming videos by Black artists, a practice Richard Harrington of *The Washington Post* referred to as "the cultural apartheid of MTV."[19] The channel's justification that such works were not rock oriented conveniently elided the fact that MTV aired a host of videos by White artists working in non-rock genres. The now iconic video for Jackson's "Billie Jean" proved to be a test case, one that opened the gates for

[18] George and Rowland, 46.
[19] See Richard Harrington, "Vanishing Acts: Where Is Michael Jackson?" *The Washington Post*, November 24, 1985, H1. Media scholar Andrew Goodwin chronicles how MTV faced calls of racism, especially in the early 1980s. He argues that the network's "narrowcasting" philosophy, in which programming was dictated by problematic notions about what musical genres appealed to particular racial demographics, was symptomatic of a larger system of anti-Black racism: "MTV followed the music industry in defining 'rock' in essentially racist terms, as a form that excluded blacks." See Goodwin, 133-137.

videos featuring a broader range of diversity (and simultaneously helped catapult MTV from fledgling network to major media player).[20] In large part this had to do with how his songs crossed over, and, in some cases, scrambled generic conventions and longstanding industry expectations about the types of music different racial groups listened. For example, the ways "Beat It" (1983) effortlessly merged elements of heavy metal and electro funk, genres that were ostensibly aligned with listeners who were White and Black, respectively. Jackson's drive to appeal to diverse audiences via savvy musical practices and relentless marketing can be traced back to the core ethos of Berry Gordy Jr., who founded Motown Records where Jackson famously began his career. As cultural critic Gerald Early argues, the key to the label's success had to do with how its music forged a sense of identity that was both Black *and* American.[21] While there had long been White demand for Black cultural expressions, the strength and appeal of Motown's hits forced a more open acknowledgement that pop music "was as black as it was white," and in doing so, rearranged ideas about what constituted American culture.[22] Jackson followed this trajectory, albeit with a far more musically hybrid, electronic sound as his solo career exploded.

By the early 1980s, Jackson's tendency toward musical didacticism filtered into his broader audiovisual aesthetic, as his music videos and short films increasingly promoted him as an auratic figure whose individual talents could unite competing

[20] In their oral history of MTV, Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum offer competing firsthand accounts from executives at the network and CBS Records, the company Jackson was recording for at the time, about how the "Billie Jean" video ended up on air. As it stands, the song had already been a hit for at least two months and there was some delay between MTV receiving the video and it entering the channel's programming rotation. See Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum, *I Want My MTV: The Uncensored Story of the Music Video Revolution* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 173-188.
[21] Gerald Early, *One Nation Under a Groove: Motown and American Culture*, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 48.
[22] Early, 84.

factions of people. Such productions extended the ways his music videos had long exploited the generic hallmarks of science fiction and horror to position Jackson as a special, solitary outsider.[23] The initial statement of his solo career, the music video for "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough" (Nick Saxton, 1979), teleported him from the stars to crystalline worlds where multiple copies of Jackson performed for himself. For the video of his follow-up single, "Rock With You" (Bruce Gowers, 1979), Jackson again appeared as a vaguely futuristic character, an unaccompanied disconaut shimmering against the laser lights and smoke of a wormhole.

The loner persona was more directly addressed in the opening dialogue of the video for "Thriller" (John Landis, 1983) when Jackson famously professed to an unnamed girlfriend played by model Ola Ray: "I'm not like other guys … I mean I'm different." These lines, which were delivered with a knowing playfulness, opened a rich ambiguity around the performer's persona. As Kobena Mercer suggests, his character in "Thriller" is "different" because he is the actual Jackson and hence, only playing at being a movie star. The girlfriend then doubles as both on-screen partner and stand-in for the audience. In effect, the sequence enacts a kind of layered hallucination for viewers to imagine being the superstar's companion.[24] In doing so, the video could not help but compound an already enticing sense of uncertainty around Jackson's seemingly unique

[23] Scholar Ruchi Mital calls Jackson a "science fiction character," arguing that his work, much like cyberpunk fiction, is a mode of posthumanist creative expression in how it disturbs and fuses normative categories of identity and temporality. My work is less concerned with Jackson's potential interventions in the hyperreal mediascape of the late twentieth century, as it is with how his science fiction work reanimates and erases historical violence. See Ruchi Mital, "Tomorrow Today: Michael Jackson as Science Fiction Character, Author, and Text," in *Michael Jackson: Grasping the Spectacle*, ed. Christopher R. Smit (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012), 131-144.

[24] Kobena Mercer, "Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson's *Thriller*," in *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*, ed. Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin and Lawrence Grossberg (New York: Routledge, 1993), 98-102. Mercer also argues that the dialogue disturbs the "innocent" heteronormativity of the teen romance trope: "The statement implies a question posed on the terrain of gender, and masculinity in particular: why is he different from 'other guys'?"

but ultimately inaccessible personality. It was impossible to delineate between him and his character, a timid but nice neighborhood boy who has mysterious powers.

Further, Jackson openly inhabited the role of a misunderstood, messianic loner through songs and videos that were intensely personal. He put his investments in these issues on full display through his work on an audio storybook release for director Steven Spielberg's blockbuster film *E.T. The Extraterrestrial* (1982). In addition to recording the voiceover narration and contributing an original song, "Someone in the Dark" (1982), the popstar participated in a striking visual for the poster that was included in the boxset. The image was an ingenuous work of science fiction in how it played with the generic look of a staged family portrait featuring Jackson and the E.T. creature. Despite the jarring quality of the portrait, it was uncanny in its seeming normalcy. That these were sympathetic figures, siblings of a strange sort, was immediately evidenced by the way they affectionately clutched hands. Both figures wore contented smiles and their postures intimated that there was nothing extraordinary about this setting. Jackson's outfit further emphasized a familial sensibility, as he ditched the urbane white suit from the gatefold cover of *Thriller* for an unexciting collared shirt and sweater. This distortion of domestic reality served to humanize E.T. and helped the film's message about the necessity of accepting the alien, i.e. tolerating that which appears to be different. The image also served to cast Jackson as an endearing extraterrestrial.

Jackson's involvement with the E.T. project was driven by a series of factors, including his own sense of estrangement, his growing aspirations to produce socially conscious work, and his ambition to collaborate with major players in American popular entertainment. Though the storybook has since become a kind of footnote in Jackson's

discography, it prefigures many of the dynamics that would soon erupt in his career and his productions, including *Captain EO*. In an interview with *Ebony* magazine, which used the E.T. portrait for the cover of its December 1982 issue (fig. 37), Jackson detailed some of his personal attachments to the project:

> I really felt that I was E.T., and it was because his story is the story of my life in many ways. … He's in a strange place and wants to be accepted—which is a situation that I've found myself in many times when traveling from city to city all over the world. … He gives love and wants love in return, which is me.[25]

Jackson's public reading of the E.T. story was a perfect expression of his very real struggles with feelings of alienation. His participation also encapsulated the notion that even in his isolated position, he was an agent for generating good will throughout the world at large. Despite Jackson's best intentions, his visible affection for a fictional alien being also fueled growing rumblings about his eccentric reputation. In this light, his early identification with the alien position portended deeper levels of separation and exclusion, as well as their apparent opposites, that is, his increased commitment to messages of unity and belonging. Perhaps Jackson appeared so at ease with a motley crew of extraterrestrials and their mission of changing the world in *Captain EO* because he had experienced a dress rehearsal of sorts four years earlier.

The most famous variation on Jackson's unifying abilities in the lead up to *EO* though was the music video for "Beat It," which depicted Jackson in a terrestrial, urban setting yet still with enhanced powers. The dance moves of his deceivingly milquetoast character compel battling gang members to coalesce into a united troupe. As George and Rowland assessed the video in 1984, "But because 'Beat It' also offers dancing as a purgative, a way to expunge poisons that are beyond our choice or judgment, it is

[25] Charles L. Sanders, "Michael Jackson at the Peak of His Career," *Ebony*, December 1982, 128.

ultimately inspirational, and elevates Michael's special power into the realms of myth."[26] At a subtler level, the inspirational intentions of this scenario were choreographed to intervene in what were very real social divisions. At Jackson's insistence, the production employed members of the Bloods and the Crips, two street gangs from Los Angeles that were currently engaged in an especially violent rivalry. They were cast in part to produce a greater sense of realism for the conflict on screen, but it seems that Jackson may have had an accompanying, altruistic motive to forge an alliance on set that would then proliferate to the streets. Though such a coalition, let alone truce, did not come to fruition, the two-night video shoot can still be understood to have evoked some spirit of alliance, however temporary.[27] Additionally, the sheer dint of having hired members of actual warring gangs continues to burnish the myth of Jackson as a unifying force. In a similar fashion, in its depiction of Jackson as an unlikely but ultimately inspiring space-trotting superman, *Captain EO* also fortified the legend of the performer's powers to produce change on screen *and* in social reality.

While Jackson worked tirelessly to distinguish himself as a solo superstar in the early 1980s, his work with The Jacksons from this era is also especially relevant given how it too blended interstellar imagery with prescriptive messages of unity. Though these productions with his brothers were collaborations, Jackson often commanded their aesthetic direction. As a result, familiar themes and symbols appeared across the group's videos, live performances and albums. For example, Jackson's video treatment for "Can You Feel It" (Michael Gibson, 1981), the third single from the *Triumph* album, called for

[26] George and Rowland, 50. For more analysis of the song's unifying message, see Susan Fast, "Michael Jackson's Queer Musical Belongings," *Popular Music and Society* 35, no. 2 (2012): 283-286.
[27] It might be accurate to say that the peace on set was tenuous. In recounting the shooting of the pool hall scene, director Bob Giraldi described the gang members in diplomatic terms, deeming a series of skirmishes "rambunctious." See Marks and Tannenbaum, 181.

a cosmic train of peacock feathers, a rainbow bridge across the universe, and the brothers as astral figures sowing harmony among a diverse group of despondent people via seeds of colored light.[28] In a central sequence, a Native American elder is compelled to hold hands with a smiling Black child, literalizing the "triumph" of the song's lyrical message that, "All the colors of the world should be / Lovin' each other wholeheartedly." The symbol-laden video also functioned as a conceptual blueprint for the group's 1981 tour, which Jackson explicitly envisioned to fit a science fiction mold. As he recounted: "It had the feeling of *Close Encounters* behind it. I was trying to make the statement that there was life and meaning beyond space and time and the peacock had burst forth ever brighter and ever prouder."[29] It seems for Jackson, cosmic expressions served as vehicles of perspective; exposing Earth-bound audiences to "the beyond" might inspire them to move toward unity, regardless of their circumstances. This notion carried over to the group's *Victory* album, specifically the gatefold cover, which illustrated the group as futuristic travelers ready to embark on a two-lane blacktop trip to a spiral galaxy (fig. 38). The painting, which would not have looked out of place on the cover of a pulp science fiction paperback, implied that the "victory" of a changed world was written in the stars.[30]

While the *Captain EO* attraction continued a distinctly Jacksonian mode of condensing science fiction themes and heroic imagery, it also proved to be a unique venture, both in scale and scope. Jackson had already worked with some of the top

[28] The end credits note that the video was "conceived and written" by Jackson. "Can You Feel It" was the centerpiece of a short film, *The Triumph*, directed by Michael Gibson (1981; Visual Horizons, Inc.).
[29] Jackson, 175.
[30] The clear resonance with science fiction imagery, particularly the arid, Martian-looking landscape of the *Victory* cover, had much to do with the artist, Michael Whelan. By 1984, the painter had already created book covers for a spate of celebrated science fiction and fantasy writers, including Isaac Asimov, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Arthur S. Clarke, Robert Heinlein, and Anne McCaffrey.

directors in music videos and Hollywood film (Bob Giraldi, Sidney Lumet, John Landis), but reaching the echelon of George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola encouraged Jackson's aspirations to expand his craft to movies. *EO* involved a remarkable synergy at both the production and corporate levels. The creative team was a veritable who's who of 1980s entertainment, as it also included Jeffrey Hornaday, who choreographed the hit movie *Flashdance* (1983); designer John Napier, the costume and set designer for the Broadway musical *Cats* (1982); composer James Horner, who was in the midst of writing music for a string of prominent film releases (*Aliens*, *An American Tail*, *Cocoon*, *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*); and Walter Murch, one of Hollywood's most lauded editors and sound designers (*American Graffiti*, *The Conversation*, *The Godfather*, *Apocalypse Now*).

The collaboration also included a special in-house team of Disney "Imagineers" and newly minted CEO Michael Eisner, who spearheaded the relationship with Jackson as way to reinvigorate the company as a media player.[31] The Eastman Kodak Company, still a dominant force in the photography industry and one of the founding sponsors of Disneyland, built a new 700-seat custom theater for the attraction at the original park in Anaheim, California.[32] Compared to the short films Jackson had overseen, the most expensive being the $1 million budget for "Thriller," the resources devoted to *EO* were estimated at $30 million, making it one of the costliest films per minute ever made. While the spectacle of the attraction's premiere was in part manufactured by Disney to be

[31] Knopper, 156-157.
[32] "High Energy, Futuristic Music Fuel 'Captain EO'," *Back Stage*, September 19, 1986): 63.

filmed for a special television broadcast, an unprecedented demand resulted in the park staying open for sixty consecutive hours during which the attraction ran continuously.[33]

For Jackson, perhaps the more significant aspect of the production resonated with his belief in the shared, lasting effects of film's storytelling capabilities. As he argues in his memoir: "When you make a film, you're capturing something elusive and you're stopping time. The people, their performances, the story become a thing that can be shared by people all over the world for generations and generations."[34] This suspension of time found a singular expression in *Captain EO*, both within the world of the film and outside the theater. The attraction blurred temporal boundaries, an effect that was aided by the ambiguity of its setting. In following what was a clear influence on the production, George Lucas's *Star Wars* franchise, it seems that this story might also take place "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away." Yet the film's science fiction elements also lent it the air of futurity. Further, the attraction was physically located in the Tomorrowland and Future World sections at Disney theme parks, emphasizing the impression that it was ahead of its time. Its 3D components were not nearly as visionary as the marketing claimed, after all, the technology had been around since the early twentieth century, but *EO* offered a novel encounter with Jackson that was seemingly direct and in the present moment.[35] In conjunction with its science fiction trappings, the attraction virtualized a

[33] The writers for *Stereo World*, a publication specializing in 3D technology, reported that admission sales broke attendance records at Disneyland and that despite wait times of four to five hours, "audience reaction to the film was loud and enthusiastic." See Susan Pinsky, Bill Shepard and David Starkman, "Captain EO: A $pectacular 3-D Film," *Stereo World*, November/December 1986, 39.
[34] Jackson, 133-134.
[35] Stereoscopic 3D technology has existed in a variety of forms since the early days of photography, but the format did not enjoy widespread support from the film industry (and popularity) until the early 1950s. The evolution of 3D film is bound up with regressive ideological notions about race. The short-lived 3D boom during the mid-twentieth century was spurred by the release of *Bwana Devil* (Arch Oboler, 1952), a story of heroic British engineers in colonial-era Africa. In other words, an imperialist adventure that ratified the superiority of "civilized" Whiteness proved to be the ideal narrative premise to showcase a moving image

complicated network of emotional inclinations toward social transformation, unity, and the acceptance of racial difference to arrive in the future—notions that were then suspended and reactivated on a relentless, 17-minute loop.[36]

An Aesthetic of (Virtual) Astonishment

Like most amusement park offerings, *Captain EO* delivered the experience of jolts, brushes with danger but from a safe position in a theater. Audience members were cognizant that the immersive, moving experience was not technically real, yet much of the pleasure derived from how the sights, sounds and feelings registered as such.[37] This encounter initiated with a simple but crucial physical action: audience members donning 3D glasses, eyepieces that despite their flimsy plastic appearance offered the promise of observing the cosmos differently. Spectatorial engagement relied in large part on the

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technology purporting to be a new kind of feast for the senses. For a history of 3D film and its use in theme park rides, see Ray Zone, *3-D Revolution: The History of Modern Stereoscope Cinema* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2012).

[36] Despite Jackson's intention to provoke lasting conversations with film, *Captain EO* surprisingly remains a footnote in the growing body of scholarship about Jackson—as well as his own reflections. His autobiography only briefly addresses the production, specifically in terms of his awe for the "creative empire" of Disney and his love of movies for their escapist quality. See Jackson, 258-259. The existing critical literature considers the attraction's narrative in dialogue with concurrent critical theory and critiques of global capital. Carl Miller observes *EO* in line with utopian theories of postmodernism and the cyborg. See Carl Miller, "'We Are Here to Change the World': *Captain EO* and the Future of Utopia," in *Michael Jackson: Grasping the Spectacle*, ed. Christopher R. Smit (Burlington: Ashgate: 2012), 117-129. Evan Calder Williams has argued that the attraction's universalist message is the perfect expression of a rapacious neoliberal order that advances through the auspices of humanitarian aid. See Evan Calder Williams "'You're just another part of me': Captain EO and the metaphysics of the NGO," in *The Resistible Demise of Michael Jackson*, ed. Mark Fisher (Washington: Zero Books, 2009), 188-193. My work is less concerned with the intellectual currents of postmodernity as it is with the relationships between the attraction's audiovisual mechanics and its ideological suggestions about racial Blackness.

[37] My analysis on this point is influenced by film historian Tom Gunning's analysis of the uncanny appeal of moving images screened at the first film exhibitions, specifically the mechanics of their visual shocks. In his work on the origin myth that panicked viewers fled the image of a train barreling at them, Gunning argues spectators' astonishment had less to do with misconstruing the vehicle as real than with the illusion of projected motion, i.e. the technological capabilities of film. Gunning's work is instructive for parsing the dynamics of viewer engagement and examining the underlying psychological desires for such illusionary thrills. As he claims, such excitement enabled viewers to manage and disavow anxieties about material dangers outside the theater. See Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 114-133.

perceptual experience of 3D film, specifically via negative parallax, the medium's signature technique. The resulting optical phenomenon conveys the sensation of depth in front of the screen, which is often referred to as the "pop-out" effect.[38] When synced with the haptic, in-theater physical effects, the attraction appears to propel the projected world and its actors closer to viewers, affectively heightening their temporary suspensions of disbelief. Along with deploying these sensory effects, the film succeeds by harnessing the premise and aesthetics of the aforementioned *Star Wars* trilogy, in particular the first installment from 1977.[39] The climax of that film put viewers in the cockpits of X-wing fighters dive-bombing the trenches of the Death Star. *EO* simulates the lurches and shocks of an almost identical flight but with the addition of a hydraulic floor that rolls in time with flashes of strobe lights.

Excitement is also quickly generated via the characters, all of which will be familiar to anybody that has seen the original *Star Wars* films. The EO character fits the innocent yet courageous type, more Luke Skywalker than Han Solo, who escorts a misfit band of wisecracking robots and goofy, wooly creatures. Jackson's outsider status, even from his crew, is visually confirmed by the minimal white color of his spacesuit, which strikes a sharp contrast with the hodgepodge appearance of his comrades (fig. 39). Also crucial is the large rainbow stroke emblazoned across his undershirt, a symbol that echoes Jackson's earlier rhetoric about the unity of colors in a peacock's tail feathers. That

[38] This is in contrast to the positive parallax technique, which expands the depth of field behind the screen, i.e. within the diegetic world of the film. For a discussion of various modes by which 3D film generates sensory impressions, see Robert S. Allison, Laurie M. Wilcox and Ali Kazimi, "Perceptual Artefacts, Suspension of Disbelief, and Realism in Stereoscopic 3D Film" in *3D Cinema and Beyond*, ed. Dan Adler, et al. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 149-160.

[39] For in-depth technical explanations of the special effects and challenges of shooting 3D film, see David Hutchison, "Into the Third Dimension with *Captain EO*," *Cinemagic*, Summer 1987, 32-42. Further, *Stereo World* recounted a detailed walkthrough of the theater, the physical effects, and projection system at Disneyland. See Pinsky, Shepard and Starkman, 15-19, 39.

Jackson thinly inhabits the EO role—he basically plays himself—intensifies the visual and physical pleasures of the attraction. To state the obvious, *Captain EO* was envisioned to capitalize on Jackson's stratospheric popularity. The resulting thrills are a shade thornier though than virtual contact with the popstar, especially when considering the source of much of his appeal, mystique, and even then, derision: his status as an immensely successful young Black man in the 1980s.[40] As I will show, the attraction (mis)treats Jackson as both hero and oddity in ways that cannot help but raise questions about the status of racial Blackness and crosscultural coalition at that historical juncture.

When it comes to the villain, the man-machine hybrid Darth Vader is exchanged for the Supreme Leader, a disfigured female mechanoid whose guts are tethered to the dystopian wastescape by a network of pipes and wires (fig. 40). Her freakish, spider-like appearance—all clacking talons and pallid skin fused with metal and rubber—registers vague anxieties about the corrupting, ecological effects of industrial technology. The simplistic categories of good and evil that orient both *Captain EO* and *Star Wars* grounds a central theme, namely that "beauty" lurks within all beings. More importantly, the process of unlocking that inner goodness, in this case, EO's performance is the key, suggests that redemption is always possible for the despot despite any destruction one has wrought. This certainly has the makings of a feel-good anthem—as Jackson later belts, "We are here to change the world"—but the efficacy of such a digestible message belies a more tortuous scenario.

[40] At the time, journalist Quincy Troupe argued attacks on Jackson often had a latent racist underpinning as some barbs "came from white rock critics who suddenly seemed to resent his unparalleled success." Troupe backed up the assertion, saying, "Michael Jackson represents a black cultural heritage that white rock critics either don't know about or would rather appreciate nostalgically from someone who's dead." See Quincy Troupe, "Michael Jackson: The Pressure to Beat It," *Spin*, June 1, 1987, 48.

The peculiar violence against EO, and, by extension, Jackson himself, initiates early on. After the heroes undergo a series of dizzying plot twists including a shootout in space, a missing map to their destination planet, a serendipitous crash landing, and, finally, capture and appearance before the Supreme Leader, the real conflict begins. In this scene, the horror of the Supreme Leader's look is matched only by the vitriol she reserves for EO. As she descends over the audience she looses a blast of unchecked—and unexplained—verbal ire, hissing at him, "You infect my world with your presence." Her tone modulates from sinister disgust to cartoonish zeal as she orders the robot members of his troupe to be re-made into trashcans. The sneer reverts to vehemence as she sentences EO to "one hundred years of torture in my deepest dungeon." This punishment has an odd resonance with racial slavery in its edict of an apparent life sentence, specifically in contrast to the fixed periods of obligation that defined the tradition of indentured servitude under which many poor White Europeans immigrated to America. Further, in 1986, this judgment uncannily replicated the onset of increasingly harsh sentencing practices for drug convictions that were being disproportionately levied against Black people.[41] The racial undertones of the Supreme Leader's language further reverberate in her regard for EO as a contagious threat. Contrary to his benign persona, EO is characterized as a viral strain, a harmful disease to be contained and terminated,

[41] Among other measures, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 enacted mandatory sentencing requirements for drug offenses, one of which enforced a dramatic asymmetry to how convictions for crack cocaine versus powder cocaine were handed down. The results were stark as tens of thousands of Black and Latino Americans received lengthy prison terms for crack convictions while punishments for powder offenses, which more often involved White Americans, were far lighter. Further, the act also put in place a five-year mandatory minimum sentence for first-time possession of crack, an offense that, again, disproportionately involved Black people. This inequality in sentencing requirements was only changed in 2010 with the approval of the Fair Sentencing Act. See Jim Abrams, "Congress passes bill to reduce disparity in crack, powder cocaine sentencing," *The Washington Post*, July 29, 2010, A9. Also, see Michelle Alexander's examination of how the contemporary system of mass incarceration in America advanced along racial lines at this time in her chapter "Lockdown" in *The New Jim Crow*, 59-96.

but only after the infliction of pain. Such retrograde ideas about racialized subjects are not futuristic nor are they endemic to distant galaxies. On the contrary, the language echoes a longstanding racist discourse concerning Black people as contaminant.

In hindsight, we might also see the effects of such discursive violence on Jackson himself. This moment in 1986 now appears as prelude to an onslaught of the scalpel and skin bleach, a striking physical shift that a year later critic Greg Tate would decry in *The Village Voice* as the "savaging of his African physiognomy."[42] Tate deemed the performer "a casualty of America's ongoing race war—another Negro gone mad because his mirror reports that his face does not conform to the Nordic ideal."[43] Journalist Quincy Troupe was less acerbic, but no less critical in his remarks that same year, stating:

> Assimilation has traditionally been a social phenomenon—blacks, Hispanics, and Asians moving into white society as they prospered—but Jackson redefines it. Through cosmetics and plastic surgery, he has assimilated himself *biologically*, recreating himself in a Caucasian image.[44]

Though Troupe traffics in an extremely problematic notion of race as rooted in biological difference, his assertion is symptomatic of the deep levels of concern spurred by Jackson's body makeovers, as well as the idea that he represented an evolution in the process of disavowing, if not negating, the existence of racial Blackness for the embrace of White identity.

It is important to note that throughout his career, Jackson took pains to affirm his identity as a Black man. Though his bodily changes seemed to confirm some personal struggle with Blackness, he often spoke with a definite, albeit at times subtle, sense of

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[42] Greg Tate, "I'm White! What's Wrong with Michael Jackson," *The Village Voice*, September 22, 1987, 15.

[43] Ibid. In his 2009 obituary for Jackson, Tate acknowledges his earlier acrimony, saying that the artist's death had finally enabled the reclamation of the pre-surgery version of Jackson and given critics the freedom "to be more gentle toward his spirit." See Greg Tate, "The Man in Our Mirror," *The Village Voice*, July 1, 2009, http://www.villagevoice.com/news/michael-jackson-the-man-in-our-mirror-6394480.

[44] Troupe, 48.

racial belonging. For example, his autobiography recounts how as child performers, he and his brothers navigated a moment of tension between their commitments and interests in Black pride and the business imperatives of their record label. When a reporter asked about their thoughts on the Black Power movement, a Motown representative intervened to minimize any controversy that might damage the group's sales, claiming that they "didn't think about that stuff because we were a 'commercial product'."[45] In Jackson's estimation, the canned answer "sounded weird," and he goes on to describe how the group responded with a playful display of solidarity: "We winked and gave the power salute when we left, which seemed to thrill the guy [interviewer]."[46] Though Jackson's brief comment is rather oblique, that he noted a "weird" dissonance in the attempt to reject Black Power indicates some sense of his racial identity. A more direct and well-known affirmation arrived during Jackson's famed live television interview with Oprah Winfrey in 1993. When asked about a rumor that he had requested a White boy play him as a child in a commercial, Jackson grew frustrated, emphatically declaring: "Why would I want a white child to play me? I'm a black American. I'm proud to be a black American. I am proud of my race. I am proud of who I am. I have a lot of pride in who I am and dignity."[47] The context for this moment was just as crucial as Jackson's statements, as the interview was in many ways prompted by ongoing questions about the obvious changes in his physical appearance. This is to say that despite any of his assertions, surrounding cultural anxieties about transgressing the visible boundaries of

[45] Jackson, 88.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Michael Jackson, interview with Oprah Winfrey, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, ABC, February 10, 1993. Clips of this special live broadcast are readily available on YouTube.com.

race consistently remained at the center of public conversations about Jackson, whether in the 1990s or the 1980s.

A more sympathetic view could read Jackson as trying to slip the over-determined shackles of skin color, to transcend race and become a universal entertainer. Many critics have assessed his lengthy physical transformation in terms of how it disrupts normative boundaries of racial, gender and sexual identity, and potentially heralds new conceptions of the human. For example, media scholar Victoria Johnson observes Jackson's morphing as the expression of an extraordinary cyborg potential to create one's own identity.[48] Musicologist Tamara Roberts hears similar possibilities but also identifies a profound tension between the ways Jackson's musical and bodily experiments posits the transcendence of racial categories while simultaneously preserving Black/White dichotomies.[49] Such readings are bolstered by Jackson's videos and short films, which at times evidence a preoccupation with visualizing him metamorphosing into cartoon characters, animals, monsters, robots and space vehicles. These imaginative alterations often proved to be a means of escape, routes to evade, if not change, the depicted circumstances.[50] In that way, such conversions might be also interpreted alongside his apparent body dysmorphia as visual metaphors of a desire on Jackson's part to transcend his own person. Whether his physical transformations stemmed from scarred body image,

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[48] Victoria Johnson, "The Politics of Morphing: Michael Jackson as Science Fiction Border Text," *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 32 (Fall 1993): 59-60, 64.

[49] Tamara Roberts, "Michael Jackson's Kingdom: Music, Race, and the Sound of the Mainstream," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 23, no. 1 (2011): 24-25. Roberts's work is also instructive in how it tracks the ways Jackson's music was always already interracial in its influences and constructions.

[50] Much more could be said about Jackson's transformations, both of his personal appearance and in his audiovisual productions. *Captain EO* is unique in that while he has the ability, or gift, to change other characters, he does not actually transform. For more discussion of Jackson's morphing, see Mercer, 93-108; Francesca Royster, "Michael Jackson, Queer World Making, and the Trans Erotics of Voice, Gender, and Age," in *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds & Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 116-141; and Michael Awkward, "'A Slave to the Rhythm': Essential(ist) Transmutations; or, The Curious Case of Michael Jackson," in *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 175-192.

trauma from physical abuse as a child, or the skin disorder vitiligo, this apparent grappling with Blackness as the embodiment of damage attests to the existing levels of psychic violence endemic to the racialized subject position.[51]

This is to suggest that while *Captain EO* excites viewers with uncanny, tactile impressions of space battles, it pivots around implied contact with an underlying form of danger. It is not that viewers are encouraged to perceive EO or Jackson as menace. Rather, his presence opens a space for a momentary, virtual experience of the spectacular violence that Black bodies have historically been subjected. Race functions as an affective vehicle, an essential component in the attraction's audiovisual mechanics, the processes by which it exposes audiences to fleeting brushes with peril.

As the Supreme Leader's dialogue in this scene invokes racial danger, the attraction continues with an actualization of physical torment. To the surprise of his crew, EO willingly submits to her sentence of abuse, but only after he has unveiled his gift of musical and dancing talent. The subsequent sequence was as much about showcasing the gimmickry of Claymation, then a still popular stop-motion animation technology, as it was advancing the plot. A rapid rhythm of whirs and clicks, the electronic approximation of the gears of a mechanical object, commences. Against this sonic cacophony, EO's robotic comrades dislocate and detach their appendages, refitting them to form futuristic looking instruments. The smaller of the robots, Minor Domo, extends its arms upward and outward to take the shape of a synthesizer keyboard with a fan of organ stack pipes.

[51] Prior to *EO*, Jackson had already been subject to a host of traumas that played out on his body. His autobiography details allegations of corporal punishment by his father during his childhood and lingering anxieties from his adolescence about facial acne. See Jackson, 29-31, 96-97. While filming a Pepsi commercial in 1984, he suffered third degree burns to his scalp in a pyrotechnics accident on set. It was not until the early 1990s that Jackson publicly revealed he had been diagnosed with vitiligo, the onset of which he tracked back to the time period when he was working *EO*.

Major Domo, kicks off a leg, a projectile that becomes a bass guitar. After removing its head, the contents of which include a corded microphone, the metal body bristles and then distends into an electronic, self-playing drum kit. Despite the initial efficiency, the group bumbles through this sound check, as Hooter, one of the non-robotic creatures, trips and crashes into the keyboard, derailing the lockstep beat into a smearing halt. The short-lived performance provides a moment of audiovisual elasticity, a fun bit of stretching before a snap back to violent tension.

The disarray provides an opening for the Supreme Leader to marshal a squad of evil underlings and an incident of sophisticated mock violence proceeds. The initial terror of this scene stems from the appearance of these goons, who, much like their leader, are unsettling hybrids of metal, wires and flesh. These cyborgs are mindless in the uniformity of their actions; they march in step, all the while pounding out a machinic beat with the butts of their pikes. As these thugs encircle EO, menacing him with spears, the camera plunges into his point of view. From this first-person perspective, the spiraling barbs thrust into the faces of the viewers, jabs that were punctuated by bursts of compressed air. This conjunction of camera placement, 3D, and mechanical effects establishes a moment of identification between the viewer and EO, one that explicitly succeeds through an *impression* of aggressive force. The dynamic of this shock lies in the fact that viewers know the projected image is not real, yet nonetheless they are made to feel the synthetic production of a material threat.

As this performance of spectacular violence develops, the audience reverts to an observer position and EO goes back on display. His backing band hastily resets its instruments and looses a surging chord of synthesized sound. Urged on by this bright

musical blast, EO bursts through the ring of assailants and matches the sonic flare with visible streams of energy from his hands. These effervescing flows of orange and pink light convert many of his attackers from dark, aggressive machines into a multicultural array of humans in fire-tinted leotards, transformations that are musically celebrated with spirited digital drum strokes and bouncing keyboard phrases. The collective hue of this growing mass of dancers immediately intervenes against the stark tonal palette of the junk planet, implicitly recalling Jackson's poeticisms about the integrative capabilities symbolized by the peacock from his earlier projects. That sentiment reverberates in this moment, as the transformation of his attackers precipitates the first of two song and dance numbers centered on the song "We Are Here to Change the World."

Despite the positive suggestions of this shift to color and its confident soundtrack, what follows is not an entirely benevolent engagement. As the converts fall in unquestioningly behind their new champion, a succession of timpani strikes builds a sense of drama, pressure that EO releases with an instantly recognizable "ooh" vocal squeal. At once he becomes the point of a different kind of spear, a moving phalanx of dancers clicking their hips to a funky digital beat as they pull themselves toward the lip of the Supreme Leader's cathedra (fig. 41). As EO testifies to a power that is "deep down inside" his soul, a power that can bring light to darkness, they raise their fists in unison. Between lyrical utterances about an "everlasting light," "revelation," and "surrender," and their percussive delivery—particularly the alliterative punches of "We're here to simulate, eliminate / An' congregate, illuminate"—the scene is loaded with a palpable feeling of ideological fervor. This ardor is amplified by the militancy of the group's maneuvers through the throne room. The dancing, which is largely in lockstep behind

EO, is swift but stiff; shoulder pumps, downward punches, crouches, high-step marching side to side, and head snaps are all pronounced by momentary freezes. Through it all EO exudes intensity, his face a mask of fury. Though this performance registers a sense of urgency, it is shot through with uncertainty. As one group of critics assessed this scene for *Stereo World* in 1986:

> The dancers are excellent, the choreography exciting, but the violence of the movement exhibits hostility rather than persuasion. Have they changed these evil creatures into beautiful people or simply changed their clothing?[52]

The surface transformations may symbolically reflect metaphysical modifications, but a dissonance remains. A leap seems to have been made that is not entirely supported by the details of the scene.

Much of the complication surrounding the extent of the transformations lies with the thematic preoccupations of "We Are Here to Change the World." The lyrics and the process of their performance seeks to activate some potential "beauty" that ostensibly lies dormant in the mind, body and soul, not just of the Supreme Leader, but of all individuals that inhabit this world. The nature of that purported beauty, which the lyrics also refer to as "the truth in chapters of our minds," remains amorphous, but it is deeply internal. Transformation then is fundamentally *not* a matter of the world or its surrounding circumstances. Rather, it concerns individual modulations, interior attunements. The song frequently appeals to the indiscriminate collective action of "we," but those evocations belie the song's concentration and investments in the internal. Subjects may "surrender" to EO and the power that is "deep down inside" his soul, but that is a vehicle to surrender to oneself. His words and actions are only a lens, a simulation, a mode of illumination to drive self-realization. Though this brand of transformation may intend to foster a greater

[52] See Pinsky, Shepard and Starkman, 17.

congregation, it is ultimately rooted in an ideology of self-help, a notion that to "shake it up and break it up" inside is the means to improve the world.[53] While that message may certainly be inspirational, its advertised capabilities to enable subjects to truly say "so long, bad times," resound with a false ring. As the critique from *Stereo World* suggests, surface trappings may be altered, but the material substance of the transformation may be nil.

With its tone of fierce hope, this musical interlude serves to temporarily allay the audience before another scene of choreographed brutality. In response to this growing evangelistic positivity, the Supreme Leader calls forth her "Whip Warriors," a pair of monstrous armored overseers snapping thick electrical cords. In the circling, jump-rope dance that follows, EO is not only lashed, but upon further resistance, is subjected to dual body-shaking zaps of energy.[54] If the previous moments of prodding were not sufficiently alarming, this flogging more closely resembles abuse that defined the everyday disciplinary regimes of chattel slavery, if not what scholar Genevieve Fabre identifies as

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[53] In this light, "We Are Here to Change the World" aligns with the underlying ideological force of *The Wiz* (Sidney Lumet, 1978), the movie in which Jackson made his cinematic debut. Both the screenplay writer, Joel Schumacher, and the film's female lead, Diana Ross, were adherents of Werner Erhard, a popular self-help guru whose core message was that the only limits individuals faced in life were self-imposed. This idea permeated the film, rendering it at least partially tone-deaf to the range of structural inequalities and violent circumstances besetting Black Americans in the late 1970s. See Stephen Farber and Marc Green, "Hollywood Guru: Dr Werner Erhard," in *The Grove Book of Hollywood*, ed. Christopher Silvester (New York: Grove Press, 1998), 555-560. Further, "We Are Here to Change the World" also prefigures a theme Jackson would famously explore the following year in "Man in the Mirror" (1987), namely that widespread social transformation is dependent on individual change.

[54] This sequence contains similarities to a music video from the previous year, The Jacksons' "Torture," directed by Jeff Stein (1984; Picture Music International), which was released as a single from The Jacksons' *Victory* album and for which Michael Jackson performed vocals. The video features space warrior costuming, an oppressive foreign environment, the transmogrification of a villain, and the prominent use of whips. As the song intimates the emotional agony of a relationship coming to an end, the video visually evokes torment of a sadomasochistic variety by riffing on the look of an underground sex club. In contrast to the scene of flogging in *Captain EO*, which is more so a disturbing action interlude between vocal numbers, "Torture" never subjects the main character, in this case Jackie Jackson, to the physical pain (or pleasure as it were), of the whip. As an aside, the video is often noted for the non-appearance of Michael Jackson, who was replaced by a wax dummy after he was not available for shooting. See Marks and Tannenbaum, 207-209.

the "first recorded dance on the way to the New World."[55] EO's treatment has a longer historical trajectory that emerged with the custom of putting the enslaved to the lash during the Middle Passage. This practice served multiple nefarious purposes, including compulsory exercise to help keep captives in physical shape for auction, provide entertainment for the crew and other passengers, and safeguard the subservient status of Black prisoners. Fabre approaches the "dance with the cat o' nine tails" with careful ambivalence, arguing that the ritual constituted coercive assault, but also a space for captives to make some sense of their suffering, perhaps even rehearse for liberation.[56]

Though the practice of torturing Black bodies for entertainment persists in the attraction, the liberation EO pursues on this voyage is not his own. His sacrifice is the vehicle for the freedom of others, namely the Supreme Leader and her followers—and, ultimately, that of the audience. This dynamic is rooted, at least in part, in the relationship between the violence that unfurled both on-screen and off-screen. During the production of the attraction, this sequence entailed physical risk for Jackson. "*Captain EO*: Backstage" (Muffett Kaufman, 1986), a behind-the-scenes documentary that aired on ABC as an episode in The Disney Sunday Movie series in 1988, contains footage of a take during which the choreography goes awry.[57] As the Whip Warriors encircle their victim, the tip of one of the weapons accidentally cracks against Jackson's face and he

[55] Genevieve Fabre, "The Slave Ship Dance" in *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, ed. Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Carl Pedersen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 34.
[56] Fabre, 39. She goes on to argue that the dance constitutes the performance of "an epic drama that announces the emergence of the New World Negro," specifically in how it symbolically stages a tension between the experience of forced migration and the potential to imagine escape, "to be born again."
[57] Versions of this documentary, which is often casually referred to as "The Making of *Captain EO*," can usually be streamed on YouTube. See "THE MAKING OF CAPTAIN EO," YouTube video, 48:54, originally televised by NBC on May 15, 1988 as "*Captain EO*: Backstage," directed by Muffett Kaufman (1986: MKD Productions), posted by "douglas moore," March 6, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLew-TYg60I.

instantly crumbles to his knees. According to the program's host, actress Whoopi Goldberg, the whips were not props, but rather they were "real," a detail that made the attack "almost more dangerous off screen than on."[58] Jackson regains his footing and eventually recovers, but suffice to say, the physical pain of the scene was not just acting and post-production special effects. The EO role entailed multiple layers of violence, agony visited on a willing supplicant for the benefit of a range of spectators.[59]

In one sense, EO's role and the blows he absorbs are requirements for the good versus evil premise that defines the attraction. The story cannot function without it. Yet because of the ways violence generates pleasure for the audience through the vicarious experience of 4D, its brutality registers in a falsely exhilarating manner. EO endures the full-body writhing of electrocution. The audience is left with dilated pupils and a tingle, a buzz for further thrills that wait outside the theater. As it should be clear, this central confrontation works through more than just a general sense of implied danger, but rather a particular variety. The on-screen events are implicitly underwritten—and propelled—by anti-Black logics. For *Captain EO* then, Blackness functions as a mode of special effect, a seductive illusory mechanism that momentarily produces fright while disavowing its very racial underpinnings. Such disavowal serves to contain knowledge of the histories and afterlives of racialized violence, as this mode of Blackness as special effect is entwined with seductive fantasies about social change and redemption.

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[58] See "*Captain EO:* Backstage," directed by Muffett Kaufman (1986; MKD Productions).

[59] When it comes to Jackson and audiovisual productions concerning racial enslavement, an unused treatment for the "Beat It" music video is worth mentioning. Although there are slightly divergent accounts from producers and studio executives, the recurrent element is that the original concept by Steve Barron, who had previously directed the video for "Billie Jean," was set on a slave ship. Siobahn Barron, who co-founded a production company with her brother Steve, briefly recalled the idea: "It was more political. It had something to do with a slave ship. All the Americans were flipping out." Details about the concept are scant, but it is tantalizing to imagine such a direct creative statement about escaping racial enslavement by Jackson. See Marks and Tannenbaum, 179-180.

As if there was any doubt about the trajectory of this story, the conflict shifts, unveiling a secondary showcase of transformative dance moves that serve to align EO with cyborg beings. He escapes the Whip Warriors with a small but crucial assist from Fuzzball, one of the creatures from his crew, who surreptitiously knots the whips together. EO, reenergized now that he is no longer prey, goes on the prowl, issuing light beams from his hands that transmute his foes. Unlike the previous series of changes that revealed human subjects, the Whip Warriors are commuted into gleaming androids, their silver and ivory armor accented by blinking white lights. As EO twirls through the entrance hall to the throne room, he activates and releases bionic beings that had previously been fused to pillars lining the hallway. Once a critical mass of cyborgs has been liberated, the troupe assembles for a dance sequence set to a surprisingly unfunky musical breakdown powered by a slap bass solo and sparse drum machine programming (fig. 42). The centerpiece of this exhibition is a brief performance of Jackson's trademark moonwalk move. In contrast to the smooth, effortless glide of his feet, much of the display is pronounced with the stuttering, pop-locking motions of the robot dance.[60] EO already enjoyed a clear bond with the automatons of his crew, but this set piece establishes new affiliations with machinic beings. In contrast to those existing relationships, which were grounded by a sense of individuality as indicated by the misfit camaraderie of EO's companions, these new adherents are defined by their uniformity.

[60] Jackson helped boost such stiff, palsied steps to greater popularity in the early 1970s. His imitation of a boogying automaton during The Jackson 5's unveiling of "Dancing Machine" (1974) on *Soul Train* in November 1973 proved to be a hit with audiences. Dancers on the famed television show had long executed the "mechanical man," but Jackson's performance was said to have perfected an affectless yet still funky version of the moves. Christopher Lehman argues that the segment drove the "robot" to the status of "*televised* popular dance," as the group went on to do the routine on a variety of shows, including *The Mike Douglas Show* and *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour*. See Christopher Lehman, *A Critical History of Soul Train on Television* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008), 84. Jackson briefly discussed his perspective on the spastic dance, claiming that the moves perfectly complemented the synthesizer noise of the "bubble machine" break section of "Dancing Machine." See Jackson, 111.

Like the previous transformations of the junk planet's residents, these conversions have shades of superficiality, as these followers are immediately deferential to EO's lead. Domination by the Supreme Leader has apparently been severed, but the resulting mode of freedom exhibits its own troubling sense of submissive standardization.[61]

Nevertheless, the robot dance sequence stands as an important turning point, one that gives way to a terminal, planet-wide transformation. As the struggle develops, key parts of EO's person emanate light. The distinctive hand gesture of Jackson rubbing his fingertips together leaves them glowing pink and the rainbow swatch on his undershirt radiates. As the churning music reaches a climax, EO defies gravity and rises through the air to the level of the Supreme Leader, who writhes at being exposed to his glowing intensity. This final stage in the gift offering bathes the villain in a kaleidoscope of light. She emerges as a full-fledged human with a hued attire and silent authority that recasts her as an idealized, ancient goddess. Her followers and her world have also been transmogrified, cleansed of their horrors. Exhaust clouds have been supplanted by the swirling red atmosphere of a Martian sunrise. The muddled tangle of electrical cords, pipes and venting in the throne room, all of which once doubled as shackles on the Supreme Leader and the environment itself, have turned into an idyllic courtyard replete with grass, foliage and fluted Grecian columns. Though the ensuing warmth and afterglow conjure a picture of harmony, an ideological calamity remains hidden in plain sight at the center of this scene. The altered denizens represent an unspecified multicultural accord. The primary target for rehabilitation—the Supreme Leader—may

[61] This depiction echoes some of the ambivalence that undergirds other displays of cyborg and robot imagery that accompanied music by Afrika Bambaataa and Herbie Hancock from this time. Despite the apparent play and optimism that androids might embody, they simultaneously register as a potential danger to individuality and human subjectivity. In the case of *Captain EO*, such a threat is easily glossed, as the conclusion of the attraction imagines the cyborgs as apparently equal participants in utopia.

have been delivered from industrial, inorganic evil, but in the process, the essential inner beauty that EO unlocks is visibly White. This ostensible model of a diverse world exalts and normalizes racial Whiteness as the archetype of perfection.

The proposition of this climax moment is complicated by its cinematic details, as they cunningly extend the light-induced restoration from the diegetic space of the film into the viewer's social reality. During this sequence, the cinematography makes a subtle but crucial adjustment. Concurrent with EO's levitation, the camera shifts so that the viewer takes the subject position of the Supreme Leader. In effect, EO squarely confronts the spectators, looking directly at them through the camera. Just as the audiovisual mechanics of the attraction blur the boundaries between the physical dimensions of the film world and the reality of the theater, they also merge the targets of transformation, both villains and viewers alike. EO's direct address in this sequence insinuates that a similar "freedom" might be unlocked in the "world of despair" of the theater, an idea that is reified by the 4D design. EO's light beams not only overpower the Supreme Leader; they simultaneously immerse viewers in variegated hotspots of color via banks of carefully arranged spotlights.

The effect is further amplified by the audience's continued awareness of Jackson's appearance. The underlying logic is self-reflexive: putting Jackson's performing talents on display in 3D knowingly exploits his abilities to motivate crowds. The levitation act, during which the negative parallax technique sends Jackson floating out into the audience, serves a narrative function, but it also galvanizes a relationship with viewers. This is the closest most audience members would ever get to the popstar. The subsequent affective response, which at times involved viewers of all ages reaching

out to try to touch the star's hovering apparition, cannot be overstated.[62] Where the film depicts EO as a human battery, an organic receptacle for violent charges that he can reverse and release, Jackson broadcasts emotional voltage through the circuits of the attraction, as his virtual presence blurs the threshold between the screen and the theater.

The utopian suggestion of this chimera proved infectious for many spectators, especially in conjunction with the closing soundtrack, a studio recording of Jackson's "Another Part of Me" (1986). The song, which was released two years later as the sixth single from the *Bad* album, amplified notions of belonging and participating in a triumphant mission of change founded around a "major love" that would inevitably yield "brighter days." The mechanics of the attraction, again, were synced with the music to give the audience one last emotional rush. EO led his crew from the throne room, dotting the procession with a series of Jackson's unique moves: nimble twirls, swift punches and spastic hip thrusts. After offering a departing salute and friendly wave, EO's ship blasted off with a whoosh of air that fanned into the audience. Meanwhile, as the song's rhythm—propelled by a bouncing, synthesized bass line and lilting guitar interjections—built toward a crescendo of horn punches, the theater's automatic exit doors would swing open. Jackson's emphatic delivery of "You're just another part of me" from the chorus and his signature "hee-hee" vocal exclamations arrived as spectators bounded out of the auditorium. The calibration of this closing energized the exiting crowds, as evidenced by their enthusiastic sing-alongs and attempts to recreate Jackson's characteristic leg kicks.

[62] On this phenomenon, it is worth noting a longstanding debate about the "pop-out" effect. Film scholar Barbara Klinger details that while negative parallax is popularly accepted as 3D's defining element, many critics and filmmakers regard the technique as gimmickry. She cites Roger Ebert's claim that such moments make "a fatal break in the illusion of the film." In the case of this scene in *EO*, I argue that the "fatal break" is precisely the point of the illusion as it fortifies the suggestion that Jackson's character might also transform social reality. See Barbara Klinger, "Beyond Cheap Thrills: 3D Cinema Today, the Parallax Debates, and the 'Pop-Out'," in *3D Cinema and Beyond*, ed. Dan Adler, et al. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 186-199.

While this finishing thrill geared the audience for further sensory stimulation on other theme park rides, this energy was also harnessed to prolong the *EO* experience in the space immediately outside the theater. Visitors exiting the attraction had been primed to roam the gift shop and consume a spate of *EO* merchandise, which included buttons, pins, stuffed animals, posters, figurines, light-up visors, digital watches, stickers, 3D comic books, and t-shirts. Many of these objects came simply emblazoned with a *Captain EO* logo, simultaneously serving as badges of honor for visitors and as Disney brand builders. Other ephemera actively encouraged extended layers of fantasy, and, in some cases, continued to blur the borders between the cosmos of the attraction and social reality. For example, one can imagine how plush doll versions of the creatures in EO's crew might fire the creativity of some children in ways that brought the toys to life. Further, with its main line of t-shirts, Disney maximized both the attraction's marketing potential and its ideological challenge. In addition to the option of black t-shirts bearing the attraction's titular logo, visitors could also purchase white t-shirts adorned with a rainbow slash across the torso (fig. 43). These garments were a commercialized approximation of a key element of the EO character's uniform: his undershirt, which radiated glowing colors during the final transformation sequence. The suggestion was that guests were not "just another part" of EO, or Jackson for that matter, but rather, they too could be agents of magical, colorful change, just like him. This was made explicitly clear to people who attended the attraction's opening weekend, as they were given commemorative versions of this shirt, the back of which read, "I was there to change the world" (fig. 44).[63]

[63] See Pinsky, Shepard and Starkman, 39.

The ways in which the attraction and its accompanying merchandise readily confused the fantasy of the junk planet and the realities surrounding the theater echo the film's ideological efficacy. As it was announced in the lyric "This is our planet / You're one of us" from "Another Part of Me," *Captain EO* offered a beguiling feeling of inclusion. It stimulated very real desires for transformation and to achieve some new, universal way of life. The crux of the matter though was that such harmony, which is almost tangible in its 4D depiction, was always already compromised by its reincarnation of a neoclassical, inherently White ideal of beauty as expressed in the rehabilitated facade of the Supreme Leader. Even in her silent beneficence this figure spoke volumes, disclosing racial Whiteness as the inescapable guiding light for her world—and ours. The surrounding rainbow party, which at times mirrored the demographic make-up of departing audiences, was politically charged, yet ultimately empty. Its symbolic notions of change and integration as diffuse and acrid as smoke from the fireworks that exploded in the sky over the attraction every night.

It's morning again … in the cosmos

The disturbing efficacy of *Captain EO* lies in how it mobilizes spectacular brutality in vicariously stimulating ways only to wipe it away in pursuit of a hollow redemptive gesture. The attraction acknowledges and then looks to activate desires that EO represents: a blind hope for change, the dream that social transformation is a musical number to come. This is the fulfillment of his namesake, a reference to Eos, the Grecian goddess of dawn. Such a reassuring platitude—morning in the cosmos—might not be

surprising given its enactment at "the happiest place on earth."[64] Yet, this is still a powerful notion that is easy to get swept up in. After all, the mechanics of *Captain EO* prime the audience for maximum optic and tactile immersion. The real subject of this feel-good redemption is unclear. Perhaps it is about an existence free of industrial technology and pollution.

Given the historical resonance of the violence and the way it plays out in audiovisual terms, the attraction suggests a latent concern for the repressed trauma of racialized slavery. In this way, *Captain EO* can be understood to unfurl a displaced aspiration to magically vindicate the lived horrors of America's racist past, if not disavow its racist present. To be more precise, we might think of slavery and its afterlives as constituting ubiquitous but rarely recognized holes in the fabric from which we have constructed our universe. To acknowledge and confront those voids would be tantamount to unraveling that cosmos; the threads of its borders no longer held together by the twinned gravitational forces of Black suffering and White supremacy. What better way to mitigate such a true threat to our social reality than to perform those indelible fissures as projections of image and sound, the makings of uplifting entertainment that persists through reliance on the Black body as both sacrifice and savior?

Herein lies the terrible irony of *Captain EO*. As the attraction presents it, redemption—or even just its idea—cannot be separated from the asymmetrical cruelty it

[64] In addition to the famous, repetitive platitudes of It's a Small World that flatten and stereotype ethnic differences, Disney has a history of shrewdly whitewashing its properties. For example, the Splash Mountain ride extracts music and characters from *Song of the South* (1946), a movie the company has looked to disavow given its offensive characterizations of Black life in the Reconstruction era. In effect, the flume ride recuperates the film's anti-Black sensibility, discreetly wallowing in nostalgia for a plantation culture of the American South that never existed. For more on the film's legacy, see Jason Sperb's *Disney's Most Notorious Film: Race, Convergence and the Hidden Histories of Song of the South* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012). Strangely enough, another attraction at Disneyland still openly traffics in this peculiar nostalgia, as the Pirates of the Caribbean drifts riders by a houseboat inhabited by an animatronic, banjo-strumming caricature of a lazy Black man in the bayou.

is predicated upon. The violence to EO, and by extension Jackson, is entirely necessary for the transformation of some other body, some other world that thrives on violence. Torture is an essential rite for which its target—the Black subject—nobly offers oneself as supplicant, albeit resilient. Though the audiovisual mechanics encourage momentary identifications with his position, this is only for cheap thrills. Racial blackness functions as a device to vicariously generate titillation rather than actualize solidarity. As such, the attraction relies on the slippery, yet persistent, positionality of Blackness as the necessary subject for obliteration, whether in ostensibly fictional terms or the social reality of 1986.

The attraction's suggestion of a magical sunrise across the cosmos played an accompaniment to another notable invocation of a daybreak metaphor from the mid-1980s: the famed "Morning in America" advertisement for President Ronald Reagan's reelection campaign.[65] The narration of this ad, backed by a light pastoral tune, charted the resurgent financial wherewithal of the country, attributing growth and success to economic policies Reagan enacted in his first term. The effect is the presentation of an America that is vintage, perhaps even neoclassical, in its vision of prosperity. Nuclear families enjoy the suburban and small-town charms of farming, newspapers delivered by bicycle, traditional wedding ceremonies, outdoor camps, and raising the flag. As the ad asserted, "It's morning again in America," it also begged the question: For whom? One reply rests in the ad's almost uniform depiction of racial Whiteness, as non-White Americans are limited to a glimpse of two children of color. The implications of this answer came into clearer focus with the Reagan administration's blithe, and at times violent, approach to the lives of people of color, as the combination of its economic

[65] Though the advertisement has come to be known by the language of its opening line, "It's morning again in America," it was officially titled, "Prouder, Stronger, Better." Versions are usually available to stream on YouTube. See "Prouder, Stronger, Better," directed by John Pytka (1984; Levine/Pytka Productions).

policies and undoing of the social welfare system torpedoed Black opportunity and wealth. Further, its withering of civil rights protections stymied desegregation efforts, enabled the retrenchment of discriminatory practices, and, ultimately, provided cover for America to continue turning a blind eye to a way of life saturated with White privilege. The "Morning in America" ad offered a forecast of the late twentieth century rooted in a desire for return. Despite its claims to forward momentum and futurity, the ad visually promoted the restoration of a particular cultural order. In that sense, the ad functions as the other side of the coin of change that *Captain EO* promotes. Both masquerade as altruistic images of what is to come, and in doing so they register moving feelings of hope and redemption. But those seemingly benign projections are deeply confounding in their myopia toward the present. In their respective ways, the legacies of both these "mornings" are still being lived.

The aftereffects of *Captain EO* continued long after its initial run. After screening for eleven years at Disney theme parks, the attraction was replaced by *Honey, I Shrunk the Audience!*, only to be resurrected in 2010 for another five-year stint shortly after Jackson's death.[66] This revival staged a profound tension between its advertised function as a tribute to Jackson's life and nostalgia for the events displayed on screen. While reanimating Jackson's visage every seventeen minutes may have helped recuperate his legacy, the attraction resurrected the blood of other ghosts, those from histories of suffering that have yet to be fully reckoned with. For most of the film's audience, racialized violence continued to register as danger, but only insofar as a means to a thrill. For all its ostensibly futuristic trappings, the cosmos that the attraction imagined was

[66] In 2014 the "*Captain EO* Tribute" was replaced at Disneyland by a different science-fiction rendition of diverse misfits coming together to combat evil, a preview for the *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) movie.

always already bound by conditions that were deeply historical—and lived. Yet in their virtual materialization, their invigorating illusions of close proximity, they could not have been further from our senses.

Conclusion:
"We need mirrors": Fantasies of the Late Twentieth Century

> There is an illusion about America, a myth about America to which we are clinging which has nothing to do with the lives we lead and I don't believe that anybody in this country who has really thought about it or really almost anybody who has been brought up against it—and almost all of us have one way or another—this collision between one's image of oneself and what one actually is is always very painful and there are two things you can do about it, you can meet the collision head-on and try and become what you really are or you can retreat and try to remain what you thought you were, which is a fantasy, in which you will certainly perish.
>
> —James Baldwin, "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel: An Address"

With his 1991 book *Sleepwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years*, journalist Hayes Johnson looked to uncover a veil that had been draped over much of the country's collective imaginary during the preceding decade, namely the notion that the United States had regained its rightful, preeminent status in the world.[1] That myth sustained the associated illusions that America was reverting to ostensibly traditional ways of life and patterns of material prosperity. Further, it effortlessly brushed aside concerns that the projects of racial justice and equality remained unfinished. The notion of resurgence effectively papered over the fact that the foundations of the American social order, which had always already put a premium on racial Whiteness, were still largely intact. This ideological program, which found its perfect expression in the "Morning in America" television spot for Reagan's reelection campaign, served to animate a portion of the country that, as Johnson described, "desperately wanted to believe again."[2] In contrast to those reassuring fantasies, Johnson cataloged sobering

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The epigraph is taken from James Baldwin, "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel: An Address," in *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1961), 153.

[1] Hayes Johnson, *Sleepwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1991), 13.

[2] Hayes Johnson, 14.

turns across many venues of governance and society. Economically, America's future was now mortgaged on massive debt. Domestic and foreign policies had rendered the country beholden to global energy currents and vulnerable to terrorism. Long-running social reforms designed to protect the civil rights of all Americans had come to a shuddering halt when not reversed. Johnson was at his most incisive in articulating how these proceedings hinged on a widespread somnambulance, as desires for a sense of resurgence legislated a willful naiveté to their potential consequences, both for the country and for citizens whose access to the so-called American dream was already severely limited. In Johnson's assessment, the destructive implications for not seeing this illusion for what it was would be long-term. By 1986 though, longstanding patterns of systemic ruin had already quickened in manifold ways for people of color.

Amid this unfurling of nostalgia, Afrika Bambaataa, Herbie Hancock and Michael Jackson pursued audiovisual representations of mobility and discovery, evocations of horizons and worlds yet to be heard or seen, particularly for Black people. The carapace of futurity that their works displayed implicitly pushed back against desires for stasis that anchored the dominant political ethos of the time. They were not the only artists engaging galactic themes via electronic devices in such ways. In the wake of "Planet Rock," hundreds of records that infused exuberant, often cartoonish, danceable beats with a sense of apocalyptic menace were released from 1982 to 1986. The burgeoning roster of electronic, galactic-themed songs included Project Future's "Ray-Gun-Omics" (1983), Cosmic Touch's "Nothing Ever Changes" (1983), The Jonzun Crew's "Space Is the Place" (1983), Newcleus's "Destination Earth (1999)" (1984), Royal Cash's "Space Traveler" (1984), The C.L.O.C.'s "Diversity" (1985), and Grandmaster Melle Mel's

"World War III" (1985). As these group names and titles suggest, an array of performers took on space, at least in part, as a vehicle to riff on contemporary social and political issues. Though the projects I have focused on appeared in conjunction with these works, they stood apart given their social aims, mainstream exposure and broad reach across musical genres, including hip-hop, jazz, funk, soul and R&B. They were, in a manner of speaking, universal in their aspirations and popular appeal.

The extraordinary audiovisual flights they enacted were not always obvious in their political and social commentary. Writer David Toop, one of the early historians of hip-hop culture, noted the puzzling aura surrounding such forms in 1984:

> Strange as it may seem, it's hard for some people to see pop culture as inspirational. Electro is craze music, a soundtrack for vidkids to live out fantasies born of a science fiction revival (courtesy of *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters*) and the video games onslaught.[3]

The next phase of hip-hop music would make a demonstrable pivot to blunt portrayals of the oppressive social realities for many Black Americans, for example, the brash beats and searing rhymes of Public Enemy, N.W.A., and Boogie Down Productions, to name a few. As I show, the cosmic imagination that pervaded this earlier electro moment and concurrent R&B and pop productions, evinced concerns about the lives and conditions of people of color in the early-1980s that were just as trenchant. The science fiction preoccupations of Bambaataa, Hancock and Jackson constituted venues to project unrealized modes of social change and ways of collective being. In performing those visions, they staked out claims on the future that simultaneously refracted a persistent array of forces aligned against the acceptance and, in some cases, the very existence of Black bodies. As Toop indicates, such complexities and severe undercurrents were lost

[3] David Toop, "The Beatbox Bites Back," *The Face*, May 1984, 47.

on some people, perhaps given the fantastic nature of their expressions. As I show, this imaginative, ostensibly escapist, character is what gives the works such a remarkable, often alarming, salience. Electronic, danceable beats and 4D audiovisual simulations of the future had the power to transport listeners in highly entertaining ways. Yet such pleasures were in tension with anxieties about new technology and racial difference. As such, these Black science fiction fantasies countered, and at times, fed into the prevailing illusions of America, particularly when it came to its contradictory regard for Black people.

Much of the creative innovation of these works had to do with the ways the artists and their producers synthesized a palpable sense of the new with the old, in some cases interweaving past musical statements of Black resistance with futuristic impressions. For Bambaataa, sampling across media forms was the cornerstone of his aesthetic, which rooted everything from his music to an array of graphics and visuals to his costumed performance persona in the disruptive lineage of funk. Hancock took a similar approach in seizing on the emergent sonic conventions of electro while also revisiting elements from his own funky back catalog. Further, much like Bambaataa, he updated past radical musical statements, in particular Curtis Mayfield's keen critique of how Black life was too often misunderstood by White listeners. In both cases, Bambaataa and Hancock helped propel hip-hop into the popular limelight, and in doing so, encouraged the expressions and lives of a burgeoning culture in which many young people of color were already participating. In *Captain EO*, the more direct reference to the past was not to protest music, but rather the late 1970s *Star Wars* phenomenon. Yet, details of Jackson's

performance implicitly nodded to Black musical and dance traditions, and, in effect, propelled classic moves such as the robot and the moonwalk into the future.

While this mode of hybridization across time helped galvanize the works' popular appeal, they often faced critiques that reflected familiar, latently racist approaches to Black expressions. As one music writer put it, "Traditionalists on the scene have already choked on the output of Tommy Boy electros like Afrika Bambaataa … but they've been able to convince themselves that the new movement, if ignored long enough, will eventually go away of its own accord."[4] Hancock bore the brunt of such criticism. He weathered accusations that his work had become "monotonous, incessant beats" and "removed from any originality" in part by pointing to his record sales.[5] More knowingly, he discerned the racist roots of the dismissals, arguing they showed a profound ignorance in denigrating the musical values of longstanding Black expressive traditions.[6] While Jackson was generally lauded for his work with *Captain EO*, it was in this moment that he was confronted with an explosion of tabloid media coverage, much of which revolved around his changing physical, i.e. racial, appearance.[7] The works by this trio offered statements that proved widely popular and often affirmed a continuum of Black performance, yet race continued to be an inescapable impediment in their reception.

Just as the productions opened circuits between past and present, a blurring occurred between the contemporary moment and their futuristic projections. Theorist

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[4] See May, "Programmed for Change," 14.
[5] See Sumrall, C9, and Brinsfield, 36.
[6] Hancock specifically argues jazz elitists demonstrate "a lack of respect for people's tastes and also a disrespect for black music, because jazz is a black music but so are all those other styles." See Snowden.
[7] Jackson pilloried such coverage in 1987 with his song "Leave Me Alone," the video for which parodied the tabloid gossip surrounding his purported erratic behavior, romantic relationships, and lavish (and bizarre) spending habits. Rumors about plastic surgeries are one of the many topics depicted in the video, although it seems telling that the conclusion fashions his body as an actual rollercoaster on which he and other rumors careen. See Michael Jackson, "Leave Me Alone," directed by Jim Blashfield (1989).

Kodwo Eshun has identified this as a conceptual opportunity of Black science fiction, arguing that its form allows for "engineering feedback between its preferred future and its becoming present."[8] These artists generated such temporal loops across a variety of media platforms, modeling fantastic representations that looked to propel different futures into social reality, especially for young people of color. Bambaataa's costumed warriors exploded off record sleeves into the realities of clubs across the world. Those spectacular performances forged temporary spaces and times for listeners to envision themselves in new, perhaps similarly dramatic, terms. Hancock's version of "Rockit" at the Grammy Awards took a similar tack, portraying a group of rocketeers and cyborgs in the flesh. For a host of aspiring hip-hop adherents watching the television broadcast, Hancock's display proved to be a pivotal inspiration in picking up music technologies to create their own worlds of sound.[9] In exploiting the perceptual deceptions of 4D theaters at Disney theme parks, *Captain EO* simulated a Black superhero that was literally larger than life. Though that chimera confronted audiences with disturbing ideas about race, Jackson's inhabitation of the role in such a venue was nonetheless an important symbol. In their respective ways, each of these productions presented futuristic Black stars walking the Earth. Such distortions of time and space held especially important implications for the creative lives of young Black people. As the novelist Walter Mosley describes in his essay about the imaginative powers of science fiction: "A black child picks up a copy of *Spider-Man* and imagines himself swinging into a world beyond the

[8] Eshun "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," 290.
[9] Famed DJ Mixmaster Mike summed this up in recounting how seeing D.ST. on the show impacted the course of life: "Oh that's where that zigga-zigga sound comes from, is that turntable moving back forth. And then I knew that's what I'm gonna be one day. It was just so futuristic at its time." See Mixmaster Mike's full comments in the documentary *Scratch* (Doug Pray, 2001).

limitations imposed by Harlem or Congress."[10] Engaging the fantastic and the futuristic helped disrupt, however momentarily, the overdetermined social roles and tropes that Black Americans were purported to occupy in that historical moment.

The engineering of preferred futures was not limited to those of young Black people. Some of the most overt messages of the productions imagined the broadening of horizons for all people, or, in the words of Bambaataa, "universal" people. The concept of synthesis—mixing different, often unexpected elements—that undergirded their electronic sensibilities and subsequent aesthetic interventions extended into social realms. More specifically, Bambaataa, Hancock and Jackson geared their works to encourage tremors of change that might yield bonds of unity across racial and ethnic differences. Bambaataa's multifaceted ensemble approach grew around a personal transformation, as he saw how disparate groups of people, from the punks and artists of the Downtown New York scene to the Black and Latino hip-hop kids from the Bronx, coalesced around electronic music. "Planet Rock" was not only a catchy song but also a statement of purpose that his message of unity was going global. Similarly, in this moment electronic synthesis proved crucial to Hancock's longstanding efforts to branch to broader audiences outside jazz. This was about more than just record sales but also fostering a different sense of sociality. As he put it: "I'm trying to reach them so that we have some common ground. … Then when we've got that common ground, maybe we can turn each other on to a little somethin' extra."[11] Jackson, who had long been invested in symbolic gestures of social harmony, for example, cosmic peacock plumage and rainbows, committed to a picture of transformation at a planetary scale. With *Captain EO*, the

[10] Walter Mosley, "Black to the Future," in *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, ed. Sheree R. Thomas (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 2000), 405-406.
[11] Lake, 18.

imagery of a monochromatic junk world and its hive-mind soldiers morphing into a peaceful environment of vibrant Martian hues and smiling multicultural beings visualized desires for greater unanimity.

That this cross-section of high profile productions consistently devised audio and visual representations of solidarity points to a serious lack of social cooperation that rang especially true for Black performers at the time. Such efforts stood in contradistinction to the mirages of American unity proffered by the reigning political ethos, which articulated a sense of belonging largely restricted to White citizenry. For example, the conspicuous absence of people of color in Reagan's image of the country in the "Morning in America" ad. In this light, these works provided important counter-fantasies that at the very least recognized diverse lives and experiences. But, while such altruistic efforts may have registered in an appealing light, they did not always prove ideologically sound. In some cases, their moves for universal acceptance were ensnarled with the pitfalls of racial colorblindness. Both Bambaataa and Jackson openly mobilized the colorblind term as a way of advancing their visions of how music and art might help surmount longstanding racial tensions.[12] Regardless of their magnanimous intent or aspiration, the rhetoric served to evacuate race as an acknowledged factor in ongoing inequality and injustice. Such blindness became an excuse to not perceive how race still impacted myriad dynamics of everyday life. At this moment in particular, colorblindness provided cover to avoid reckoning with the entrenchment of a social order that continued to manifest

[12] As Bambaataa proclaimed, "The American dream is everybody listening to everybody else, right? To me, music is color-blind and universal." See Hinckley. Jackson offered a likeminded statement, saying, "Some people we knew wondered what we meant when we talked about uniting all races through music—after all, we were black musicians. Our answer was 'music is color-blind.'" See Jackson, 146-147.

asymmetrical privileges according to a racial hierarchy.[13] Such fantasies then, despite their lofty desires to recognize and benefit people of color, were subtly dragged back down to Earth by the gravity of White nostalgia.

Even as the works may have activated the imaginations of some listeners and viewers in radical ways, their details also remained bound up with the ongoing legacies of archaic anti-Black ideologies and tendencies. A current of anxiety about White supremacy had long coursed through Bambaataa's thinking and rhetoric. His concerns about racially motivated violence in this period were not unfounded, as evidenced by a significant uptick in such incidents committed by the far right as cataloged by the National Urban League.[14] As the group's leaders reported in 1982, "From every section of the country have come reports of such typical [Ku Klux] Klan activities as cross-burnings, fire-bombings, threats, beatings and other terror tactics."[15] In a sense, Bambaataa's militaristic persona, as ostentatious or fun as it might have appeared, underscored a tenor of racial conflict that pervaded the time, particularly in the lives of the embattled yet resilient Black communities he championed. Further, as the 1980s wore on, his worldview turned increasingly apocalyptic as he drew ties between race and geopolitical tensions, hostilities that played out in the shadows of nuclear arsenals. Though such claims had a tone of conspiracy, they echoed the evaluations of historians

[13] As John E. Jacob of the National Urban League commented in 1984: "If this were truly a color blind and racially neutral society, and if there were parity in the distribution of society's rewards and responsibilities, the Administration's approach would be reasonable. However, we are still afflicted by a racial spoils system that favors white males and excluded blacks, other minorities and women. We face not only the results of historic discrimination, but the effects of continuing discrimination." See Jacob, "An Overview of Black America in 1983," iv.

[14] During the period, the organization's annual reports, entitled *The State of Black America*, included chronologies of major events. The "Race Relations" sections from 1981 to 1987 detail a spate of racial hostilities committed by hate groups from the far right.

[15] Vernon E. Jordan, Jr. and John E. Jacob, "Introduction," in *The State of Black America 1982*, ed. James D. Williams (New York: National Urban League, 1982), viii.

writing in the moment. For example, Marable assessed the Reagan administration's foreign policy, which stressed American military strength, as driven by "a vision of white capitalist world supremacy."[16] While elements of Hancock and Jackson's work dallied with technological anxieties, neither looked to draw such direct connections between race and the hazards of nuclear or industrial regimes. Instead, their productions depicted scenes of racial terror that were more quotidian and intimate but no less disturbing.

The audiovisual spectacles that define the video for Hancock's "Rockit" and *Captain EO*, relied in part on vicarious experiences of Blackness as available and necessary for physical objectification and destruction. In both cases, Blackness is positioned as modes of technology—devices calibrated to heighten the experience of the productions. The results were often lauded as technical innovations, but as I show, they trafficked in timeworn notions about Black bodies as objects that were disposable yet also essential to maintaining a social hierarchy that privileged racial Whiteness. In the normative everyday environment of the "Rockit" video, Blackness manifests as an ambient televisual presence; a performing Black body is equated with an appliance. Not only is that object shown to be incompatible with the domestic scene, its dramatic expulsion is punctuated by a thrilling burst of demolition. Though the action may have been intended as tongue-in-cheek, its implications are far more grievous in its casual disregard for Black existence. The conclusion of *Captain EO*—a neoclassical scene of harmony among beautiful beings, human and cyborg alike—is less overtly vicious, but its idealism is underwritten by a similar inclination toward Black bodies. The vicarious thrills of the attraction revolve around violence that bears an uncanny resemblance to the mindsets and practices of racial slavery. Perhaps most disconcerting is how such brutality

[16] See Marable, 178-179.

is leveraged to propel the transformation of an oppressive world into a utopia that continues to venerate Whiteness. This reemphasizes how the horrors of anti-Black violence played crucial roles in policing racial boundaries and hierarchies. In that light, they effortlessly aligned with the dominant political priorities of the moment, which demonstrated little regard for the actual lives of Black people.

Also alarming is that these works played to audiences numbering in the millions. That their concerns and violent representations drew little public comment, particularly in the cases of the "Rockit" video and *Captain EO*, suggest that so many people either could not perceive or refused to observe the destruction unfolding in front of their eyes. Instead, the productions were celebrated for their musical and technological innovations, as well as for helping to break through the segregated policies of American media venues. As my work shows, moving up the chains of popular culture, while significant in helping Black performers gain entrée to such spaces and generating more diverse representations on radio and television, did not resolve enduring anti-Black attitudes or their attendant violence. Indeed, it almost seemed that inclusion strangely required such treatment of these new inhabitants. The artists were not entirely unware of this predicament or its stakes. Bambaataa railed against racism that he saw as endemic to the music industry. Hancock updated Curtis Mayfield's sly critique of how Black life in America and its resulting art was habitually misunderstood. In taking on the Captain EO role, Jackson, in a way, willingly sacrificed himself to try and redeem such sins.

To put this in a somewhat different perspective, the trajectory of these antagonisms—Bambaataa's progressively grim diagnoses of racial conflict, the nonsensical yet peculiar violence of the "Rockit" video, and the exhilarating virtual

cruelty of Captain EO—roughly tracks with the twinned downward spikes in social conditions for Black people and American race relations. In a sense, narrating those phenomena symptomatically, that is, in dialogue with these audiovisual productions, yields some sense of how the confusing tensions of the "modern racial paradox" unfolded, and were experienced and expressed. In working to engineer their desired boundless futures, the productions simultaneously elaborated the ensemble of conditions that circumscribed such efforts toward liberation. As Samuel R. Delaney has us note, these futures were "distortions of the present," mirrors of a fantastic, otherworldly sort.[17] They gave truth to the lie that justice and equality for all Americans had been achieved as the close of the late twentieth century drew near. By observing through the artist's creative negotiations of the conflicting sociopolitical and industry terrains, it becomes all too clear that epistemic violence remained a constant state of affairs.

In looking at the works in hindsight, we can make out their possibilities and surrounding impediments, which included pervasive efforts to not acknowledge either. Racial ideologies remained deeply ingrained in the firmament of the American cultural imaginary. However, social blindness to their manifestations, whether innocent or willful, prevailed. This capacity to shield one's perspective aligns with what Johnson observed as a mode of sleepwalking. Rather than imply a sense of false consciousness, to an extent I have looked to describe how such acts were the results of active, and often highly engaging, processes. Many Americans, particularly those eager "to believe again," were encouraged to not critically observe the complex advantages of their worlds—or the related horrors in the worlds of other people. This did not happen only in campaign ads or political discourse, but it also permeated the audiovisual mechanics of popular media,

[17] Delaney, 176.

which even as it began to embrace Black performers, subjected them to familiar conditions of marginalization and outright violence. In other words, it is not just the sleepwalking of the 1980s that should concern us, but, perhaps more importantly, the production of fantasies that fortified such ill-informed behaviors and attitudes.

That lesson, unfortunately, still holds true. Though there are substantive divergences between the early 1980s and our contemporary moment, the resemblances are as uncanny as they are disconcerting. People who openly circulated racist and xenophobic rhetoric are now powerful White House staffers. Federal budget priorities aim to gut social programs in exchange for tax cuts for the affluent and ramped up military spending. Plans for reviving the "War on Drugs" and "law-and-order" are underway at the Department of Justice. The specter of global nuclear build-up and updating is a renewed topic. Fantasy and its corollary of historical amnesia are crucial to these designs. The great traction of an incoherent vision on the order of "America First" appears poised to legislate a range of material devastation that yet again will register asymmetrically across American society. At a time of such shocking echoes, writer James Baldwin's counsel seems as prescient as it would have been in the 1960s, or for that matter, the 1980s: "You can meet the collision head-on and try and become what you really are or you can retreat and try to remain what you thought you were, which is a fantasy, in which you will certainly perish."[18] Or, to finally return to the epigraph by the science fiction writer Stanislaw Lem that I began this entire journey with: "We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors."[19]

[18] Baldwin, 153.
[19] Lem, 80.

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Appendix: Figures

Fig. 1: Flyer for a Bambaataa performance featuring the P-Funk character Sir Nose D'voidoffunk. (Designed by Eddie Ed. "James Monroe H.S., April 11, 1980," photocopy, Breakbeat Lenny Archive, 1980-2004, Series II: Flyers, box 4, The Cornell Hip Hop Collection).

Fig. 2: Flyer for a Bambaataa performance featuring a cut-and-paste image of P-Funk. (Designed by Mr. Freeze with art by Poo 2. "J.H.S. 131, Oct. 24, 1981," photocopy, Breakbeat Lenny Archive, 1980-2004, Series II: Flyers, box 4, The Cornell Hip Hop Collection.)

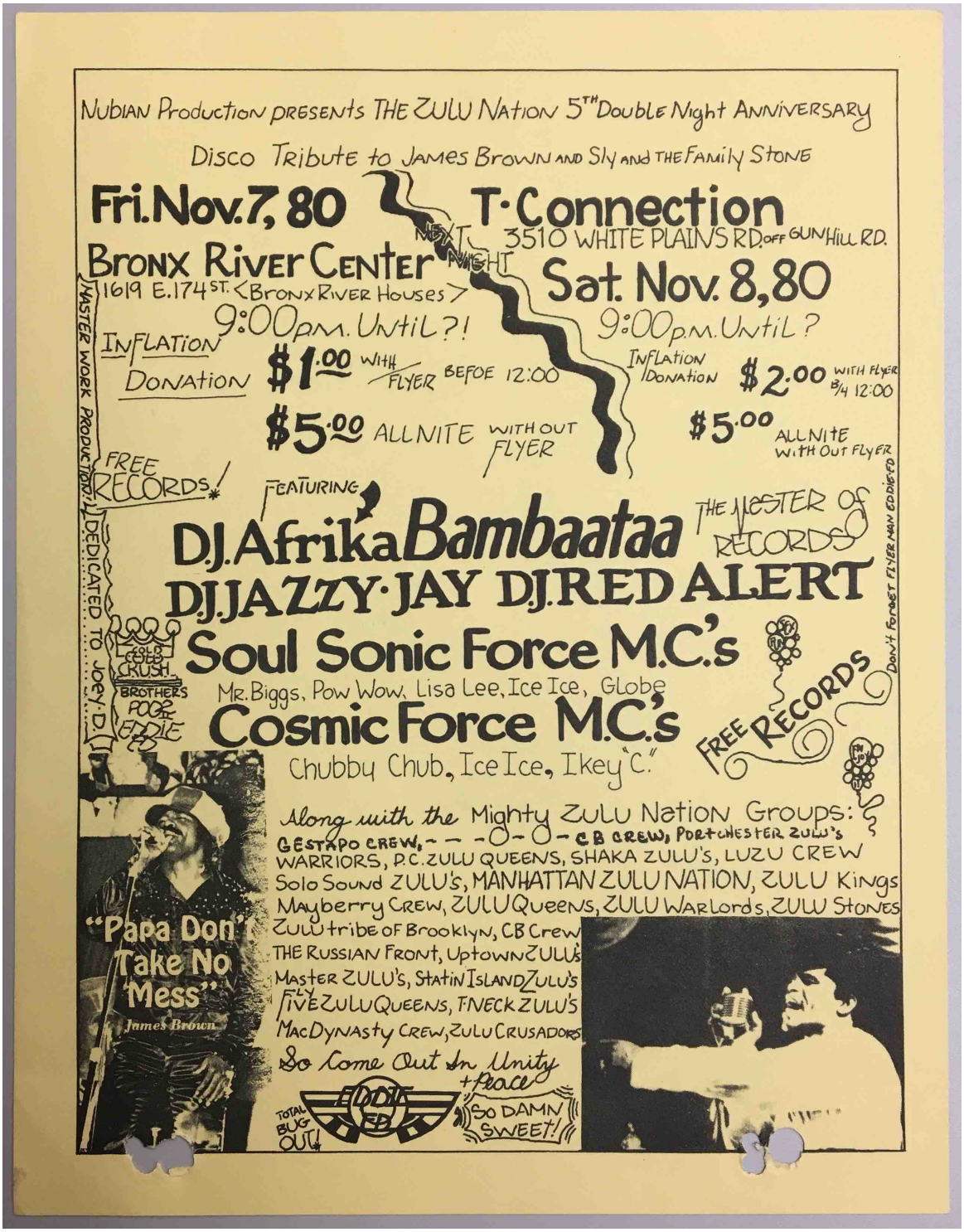


Fig. 3. Flyer for a tribute night to James Brown. (Designed by Eddie Ed. "Bronx River & T-Connection, Nov. 7 & 8, 1980," photocopy, Breakbeat Lenny Archive, 1980-2004, Series II: Flyers, box 4, The Cornell Hip Hop Collection.)

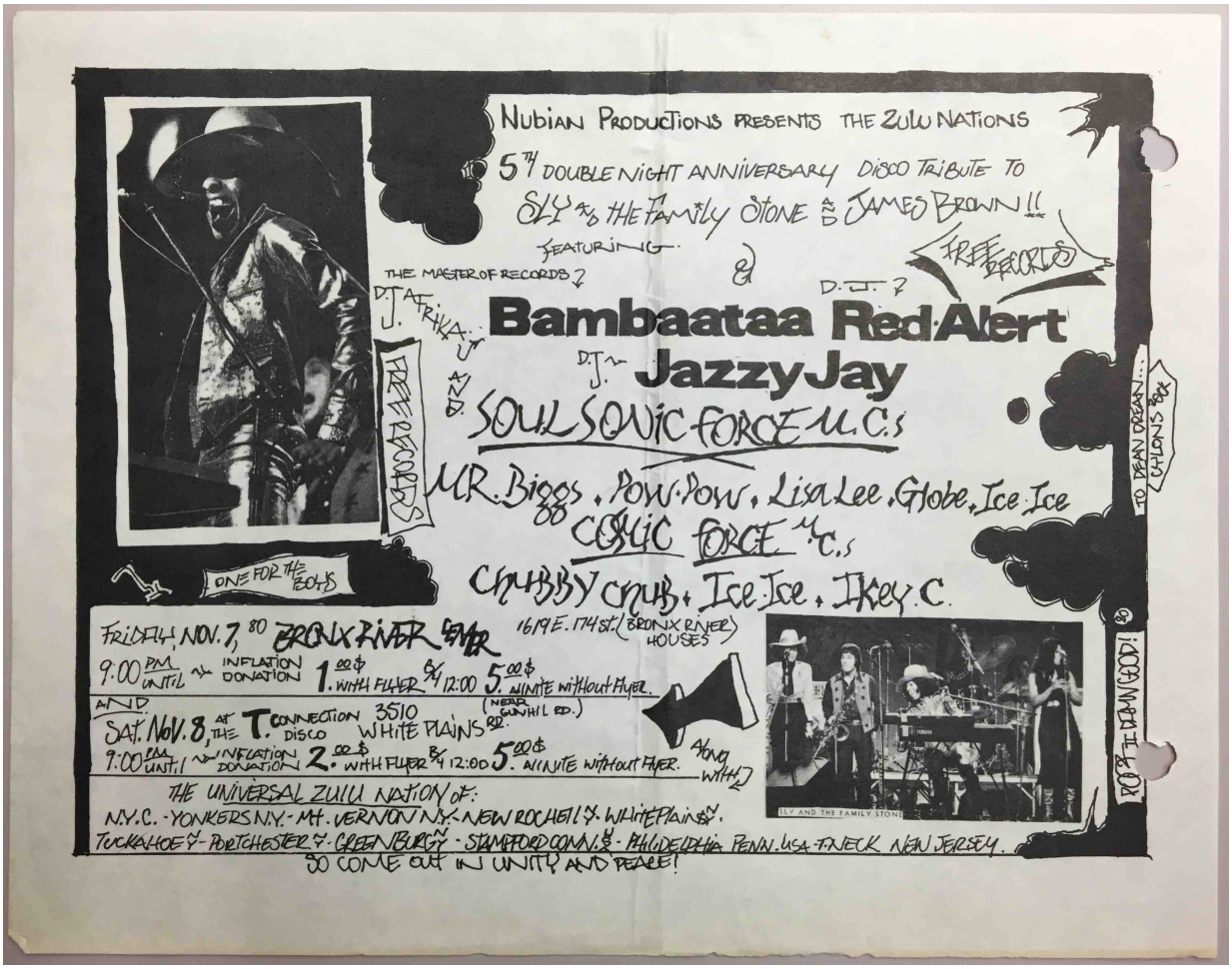


Fig. 4. Flyer for a tribute night to Sly and the Family Stone. (Designed by Poo 2. "Bronx River & T-Connection, Nov. 7, 8, 1980," photocopy, Breakbeat Lenny Archive, 1980-2004, Series II: Flyers, box 4, The Cornell Hip Hop Collection).

Fig. 5. Record by Sun Ra in Bambaataa's record collection. (Sun Ra, *Atlantis*, Impulse AS 9239, 1973, 33 1/3 rpm. Afrika Bambaataa Archive, vinyl record collection, The Cornell Hip Hop Collection.)

Fig. 6. Bambaataa's third single for Tommy Boy shows the influence of comic books. (Afrika Bambaataa and Soulsonic Force, "Renegades of Funk," Tommy Boy TB 839, 1983, 33 1/3 rpm. Illustration by Bob Camp)

Fig. 7. Bambaataa described the cover of a Kraftwerk record as "some weird-looking, robot-type of things." (Kraftwerk, *The Man-Machine,* Capitol SW-11728, 1978, 33 1/3 rpm. Artwork by Karl Klefisch and photography by Gunter Frohling. Concept by Florian Schneider and Ralf Hutter was inspired by El Lissitzky)

Fig. 8. Bambaataa references an album by Yellow Magic Orchestra when describing how he "used to look for weird covers." (Yellow Magic Orchestra, *Yellow Magic Orchestra*, Horizon SP-736, 1979, 33 1/3 rpm. Art direction by Roland Young with artwork by Lou Beach, and design by Amy Nagasawa and Chuck Beeson)

Fig. 9. The melody for “Planet Rock” interpolates “The Mexican,” which appeared on a Babe Ruth album featuring sci-fi art. (Babe Ruth, *First Base*, Harvest SW-11151, 1972, 33 1/3 rpm. Painting by Roger Dean)

Fig. 10. *The Adventures of Captain Sky* album influenced Bambaataa's music and visuals. (Captain Sky, *The Adventures of Captain Sky*, AVI AVI 6042, 1978, 33 1/3 rpm. Design and art by The Committee)

Fig. 11. Flyer for a Bambaataa performance features a Zulu Nation warrior surfing on a record, much like Captain Sky. (Designed by Eddie Ed with art by Poo 2. "T-Connection, February 20, 1981," photocopy, Breakbeat Lenny Archive, 1980-2004, Series II: Flyers, box 4, The Cornell Hip Hop Collection.

Fig. 12. Flyer for a Zulu Nation party featuring the P-Funk character Sir Nose D'voidoffunk and a futuristic warrior figure. (Art by Poo 2. "Bronx River Center, February 24, 1983," photocopy, Charlie Ahearn Hip-Hop Archive, Series I: Wild Style Materials (fliers, publicity materials), box 4, The Cornell Hip Hop Collection.)

Fig. 13. Flyer for a Bambaataa performance featuring a Zulu Nation warrior that mixes tribal and Bronx attire. (Designed by Eddie Ed with art by Poo 2. "Bronx River Center, November 15, 1980," photocopy, Cornell University Library.)

Fig. 14. Flyer for a Bambaataa performance featuring a Zulu Nation warrior that mixes tribal and Bronx attire. (Designed by Eddie Ed with art by Poo 2. "T-Connection, March 27, 1981," photocopy, Cornell University Library Hip-Hop Collection, Series IV: Party and Club Fliers, box 32, The Cornell Hip Hop Collection.)

Fig. 15. The tilting masthead for the *X-Men* comic. (Arnold Drake and Jim Steranko, *X-Men* #50, November 1968.)

Fig. 16. Comic featuring the trope of characters bursting through the cover. (Gil Kane, Dave Cockrum and Len Wein, *Giant Size X-Men* #1, May 1975.)

Fig. 17. Album cover featuring Bambaataa and Soulsonic Force as "universal people." (Afrika Bambaataa & Soulsonic Force, *Planet Rock - The Album*, Tommy Boy TBLP 1007, 1986, 33 1/3 rpm. Painting by John Aquilino with art direction by Monica Lynch and design by Stephen Miglio)

Fig. 18. Album cover for Shango, a Bambaataa side project, also references comic book gods. (Shango, *Shango Funk Theology*, Celluloid CELL 6100, 1984, 33 1/3 rpm. Painting by John Aquilino with design by Thi-Linh Le from a concept by Afrika Bambaataa)

Fig. 19. A visual reference point for the Galactus character. (Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, *Fantastic Four* #49, April 1966)

Fig. 20. Press photo shot by George Dubose shows the fantastic warrior-like personas of Bambaataa and the Soulsonic Force. (Tommy Boy press photo)

Fig. 21. Flyer for a Bambaataa performance shows costume variations. ("Hunts Point Palace, January 21, 1983," photocopy, Cornell University Library Hip-Hop Collection, Series IV: Party and Club Fliers, box 32, The Cornell Hip Hop Collection.)

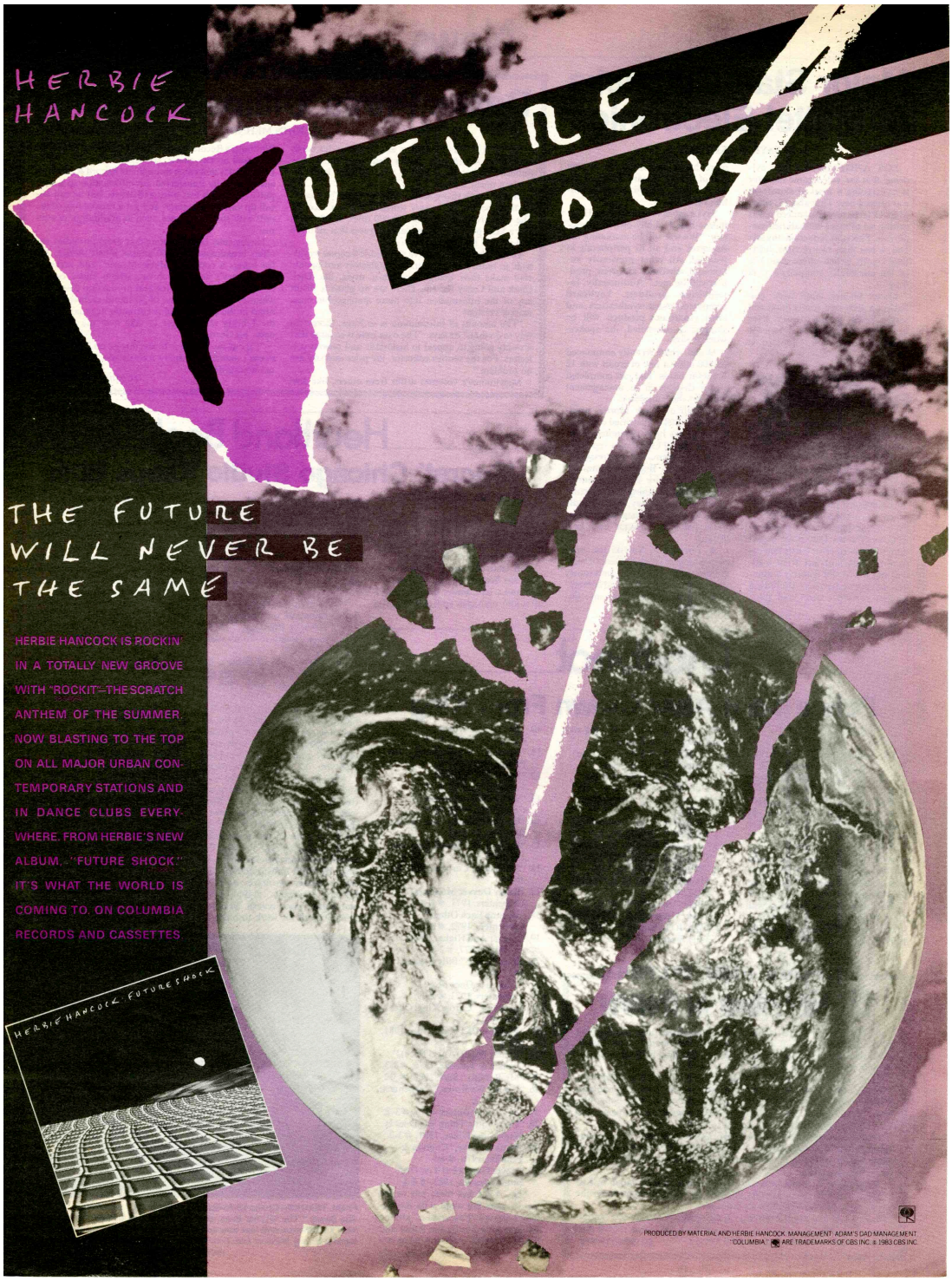


Figure 22. Print ad suggesting the earth-shattering impact of Hancock's *Future Shock* album. ("The Future Will Never Be The Same," Columbia Records trade advertisement, *Billboard*, Aug. 13, 1983, 5.)

Figure 23. The collision of the ancient and futuristic on the cover for Hancock's *Sextant* album. (Herbie Hancock, *Sextant*, Columbia KC 32212, 1983, 33 1/3 rpm. Painting by Robert Springett.)

Figure 24. Press photo showing Hancock in the studio with one of the producers from Material and two other performers on the *Future Shock* album. From left: Herbie Hancock, singer Bernard Fowler, DJ Grand Mixer D.ST., (rear) producer Bill Laswell (Columbia Records press photo)

Figure 25. Press photo showing Hancock with Jim Whiting sculptures from the “Rockit” music video. (Columbia Records press photo)

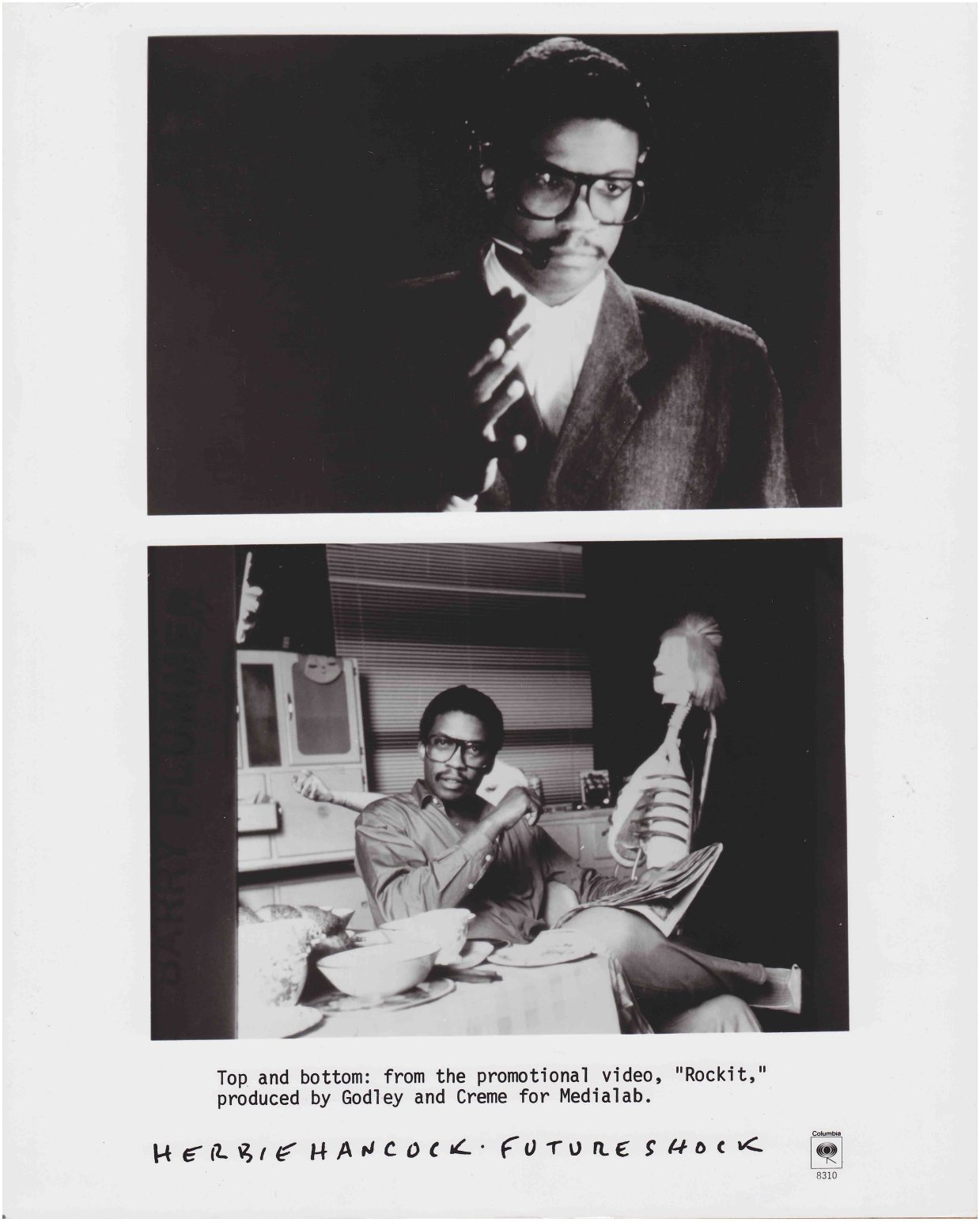


Figure 26. Press photo with Hancock on the set of the “Rockit” music video. (Columbia Records press photo)

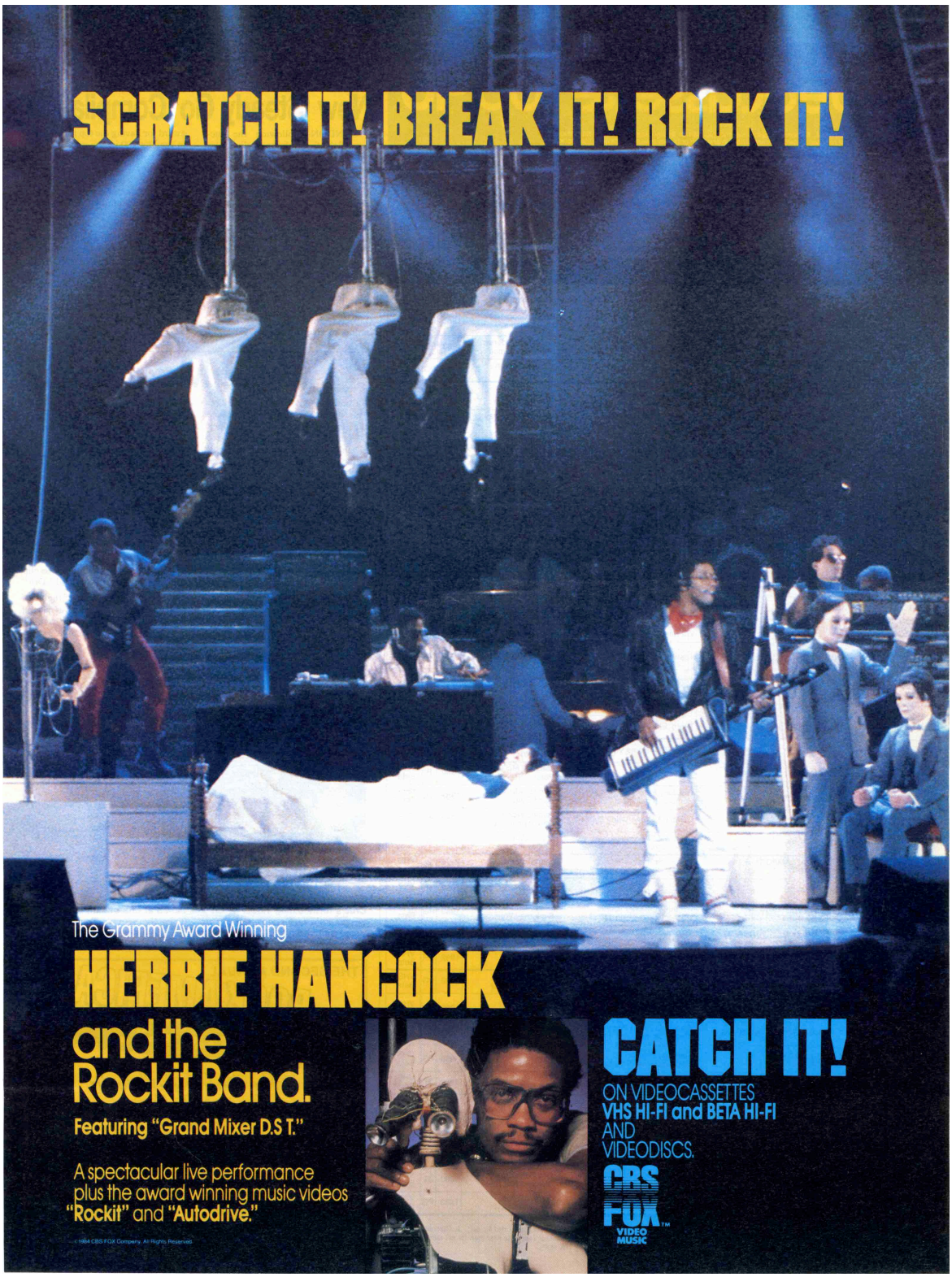


Figure 27. Scene of "Rockit" performance at the 24th Annual Grammy Awards as seen in advertisement for *Herbie Hancock and the Rockit Band* (Ken O'Neil, 1984) videocassette release. (CBS/Fox trade advertisement, *Billboard*, May 12, 1984, 33)

Figure 28. Press photo showing Hancock with a Davis Clavitar. (Columbia Records press photo)

Figure 29. “Future shocks” facing Black Americans in the 1970s as depicted on Mayfield’s *Back to the World* cover. (Curtis Mayfield, *Back to the World*, Curtom CRS-8015, 1973, 33 1/3 rpm. Illustration by Gary Wolkowitz)

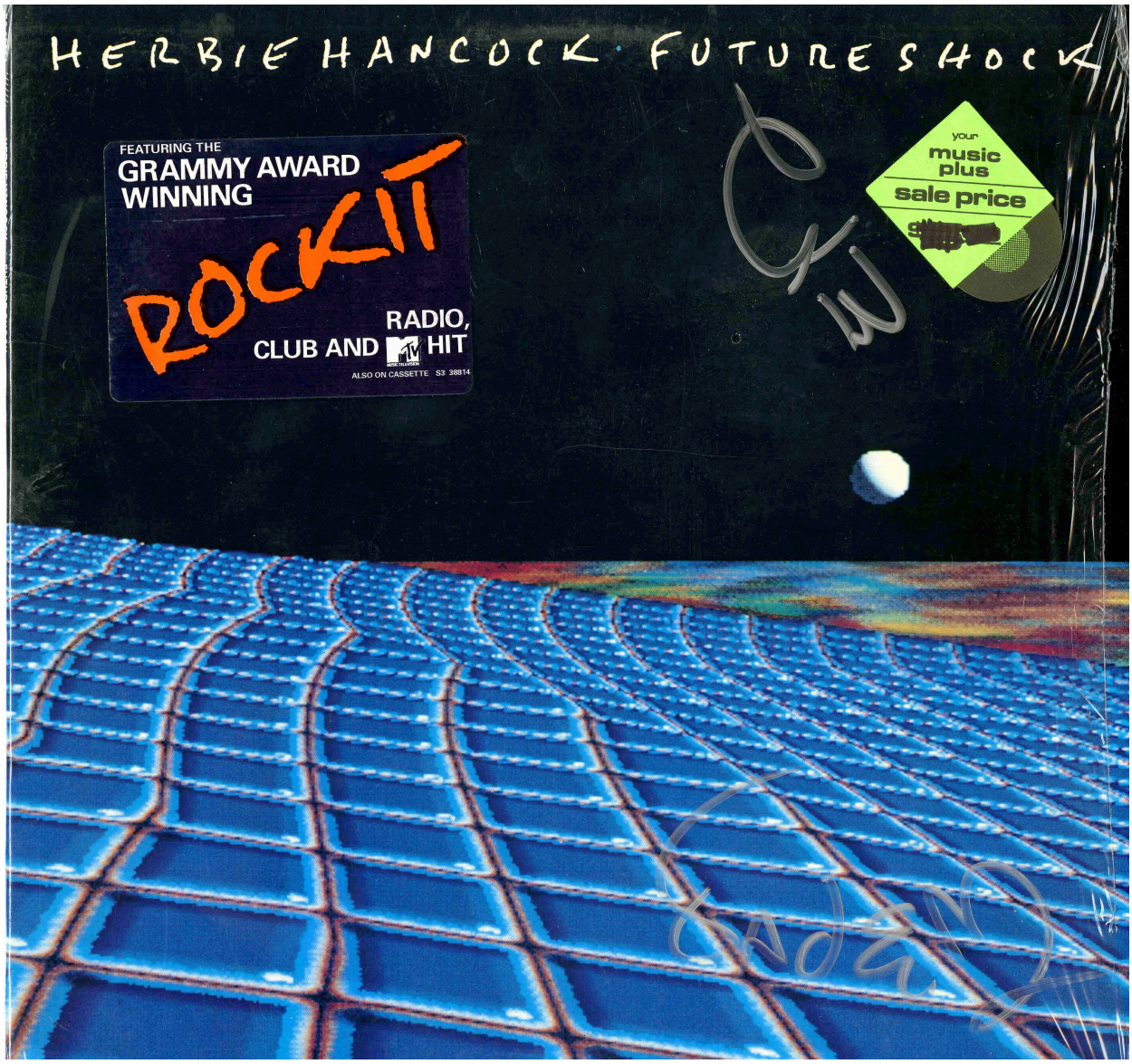
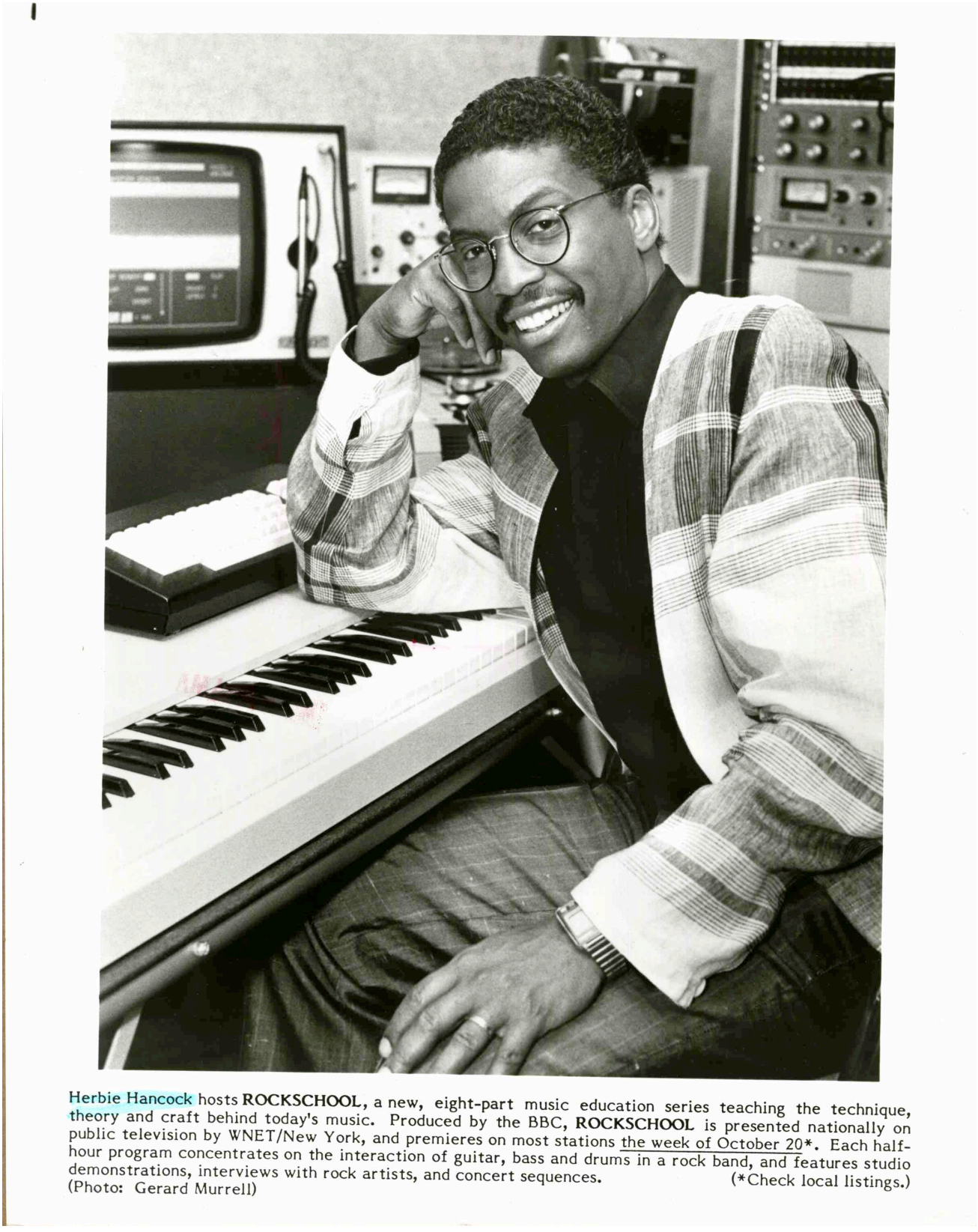


Figure 30. *Future Shock* album featuring a detail from David Em's *Approach* (1979). (Herbie Hancock, *Future Shock*, Columbia FC 38814, 1983, 33 1/3 rpm)

Figure 31. A shift in Columbia's *Future Shock* marketing. ("The Shock Heard 'Round the World" Columbia Records advertisement, *Billboard*, May 5, 1984, 5)



Herbie Hancock hosts **ROCKSCHOOL**, a new, eight-part music education series teaching the technique, theory and craft behind today's music. Produced by the BBC, **ROCKSCHOOL** is presented nationally on public television by WNET/New York, and premieres on most stations the week of October 20*. Each half-hour program concentrates on the interaction of guitar, bass and drums in a rock band, and features studio demonstrations, interviews with rock artists, and concert sequences. (*Check local listings.)
(Photo: Gerard Murrell)

Figure 32. Press photo showing Hancock with Fairlight CMI.(*Rockschool* press photo)

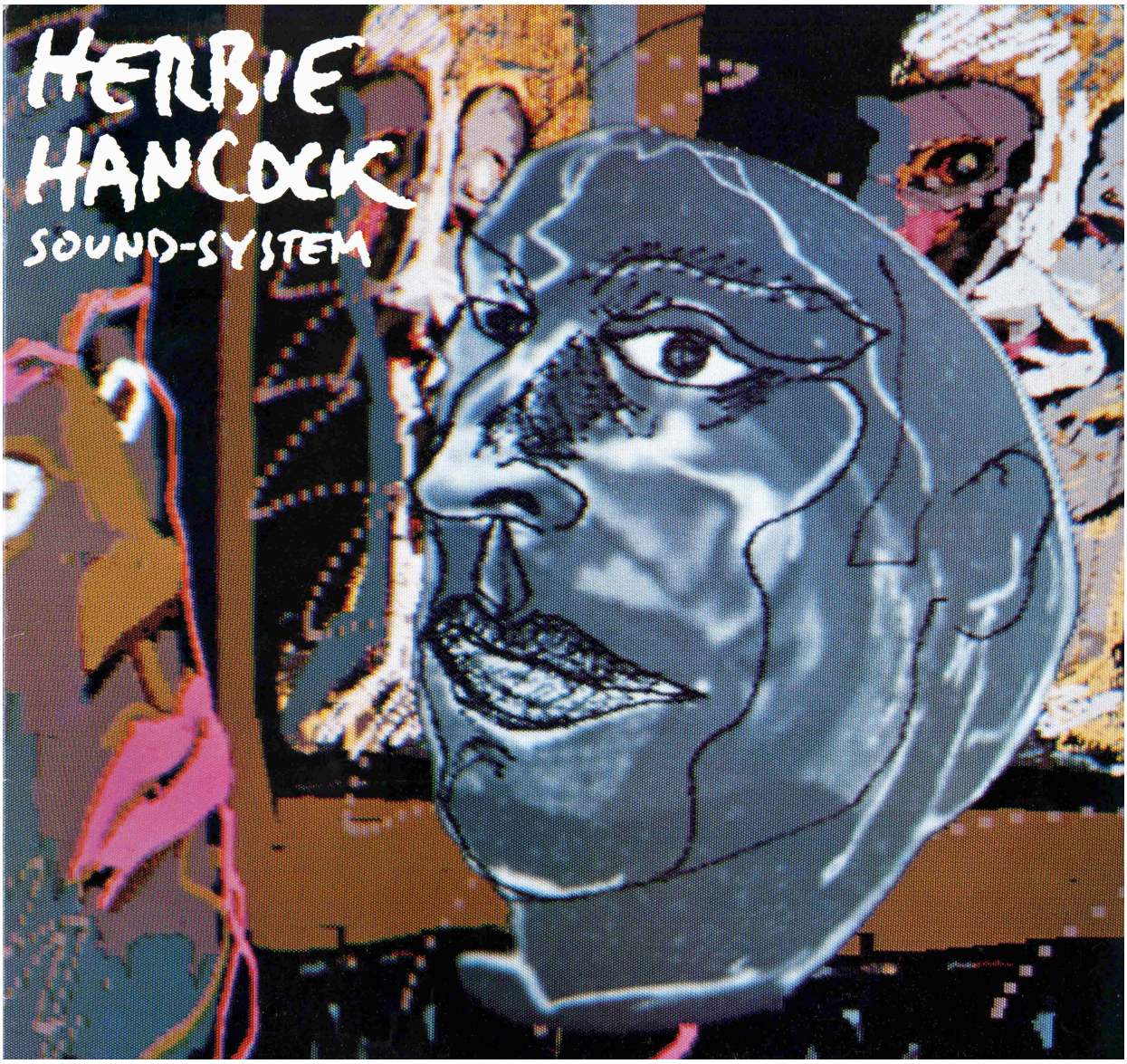


Figure 33: *Sound-System* album featuring a detail from David Em's *The Five of Us* (1983). (Herbie Hancock, *Sound-System*, Columbia FC 39478, 1984, 33 1/3 rpm)

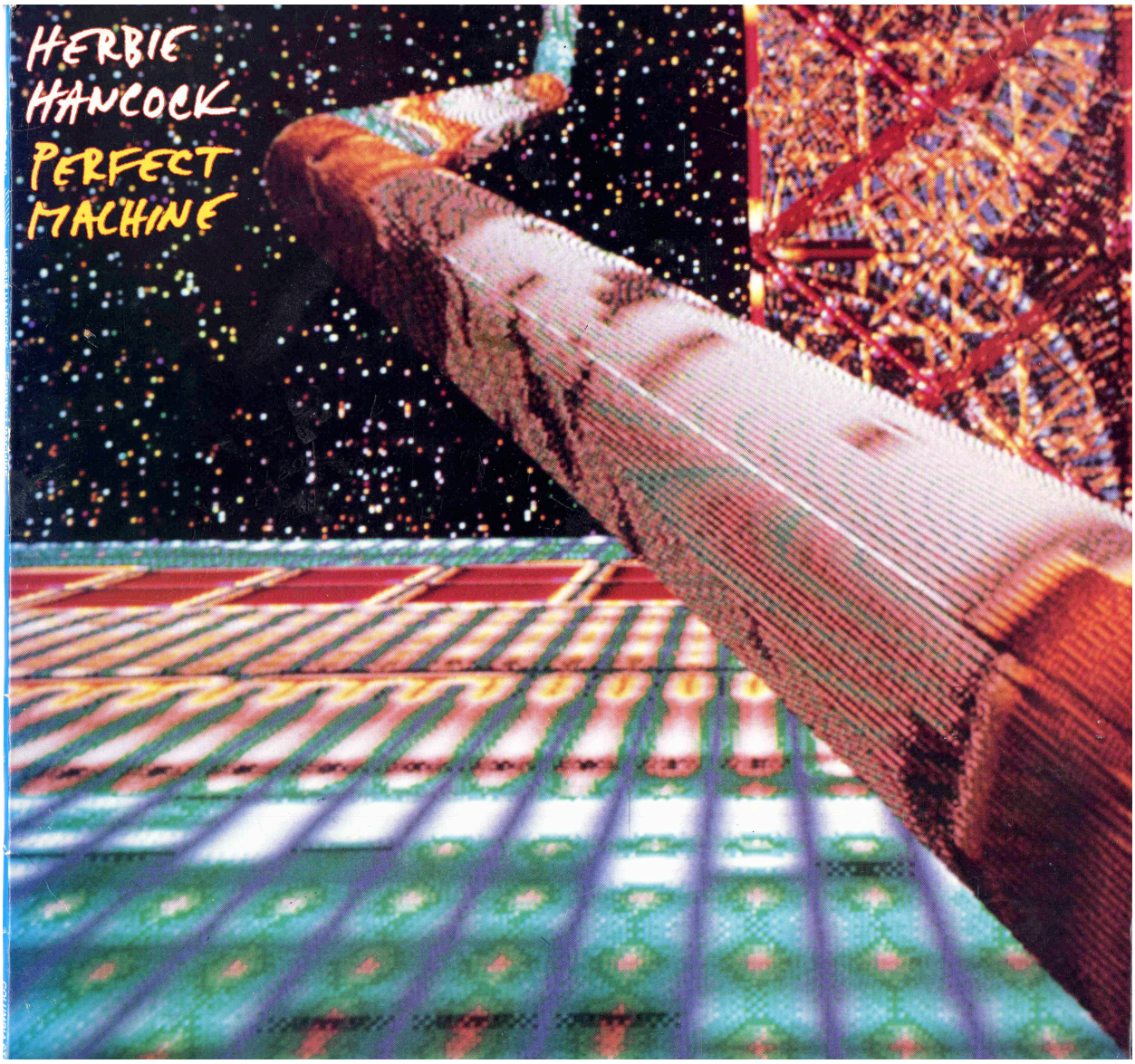


Figure 34. Perfect Machine album featuring a detail from David Em's *Trans Jovian Pipeline* (1979). (Herbie Hancock, *Perfect Machine*, Columbia FC 40025, 1988, 33 1/3 rpm)

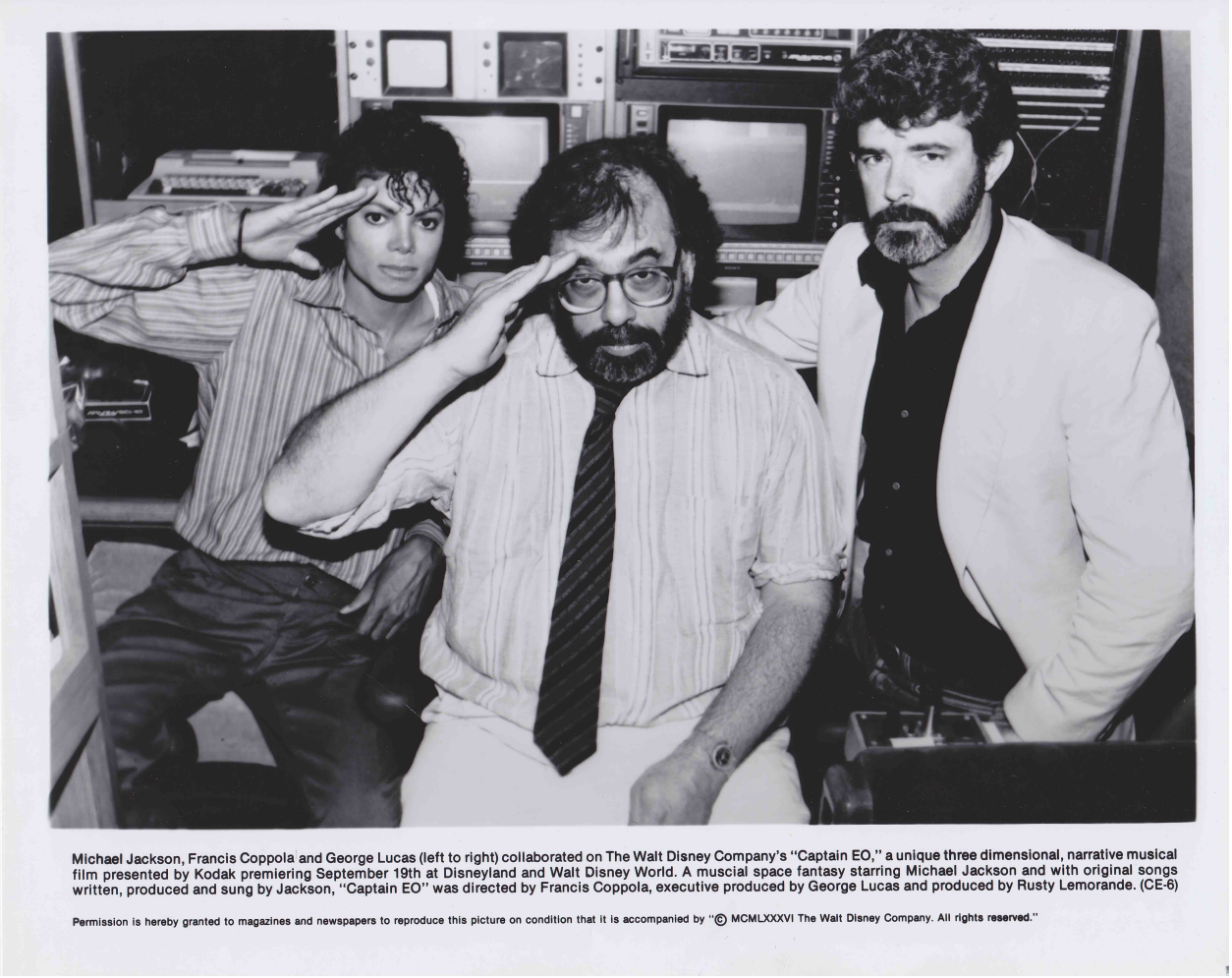


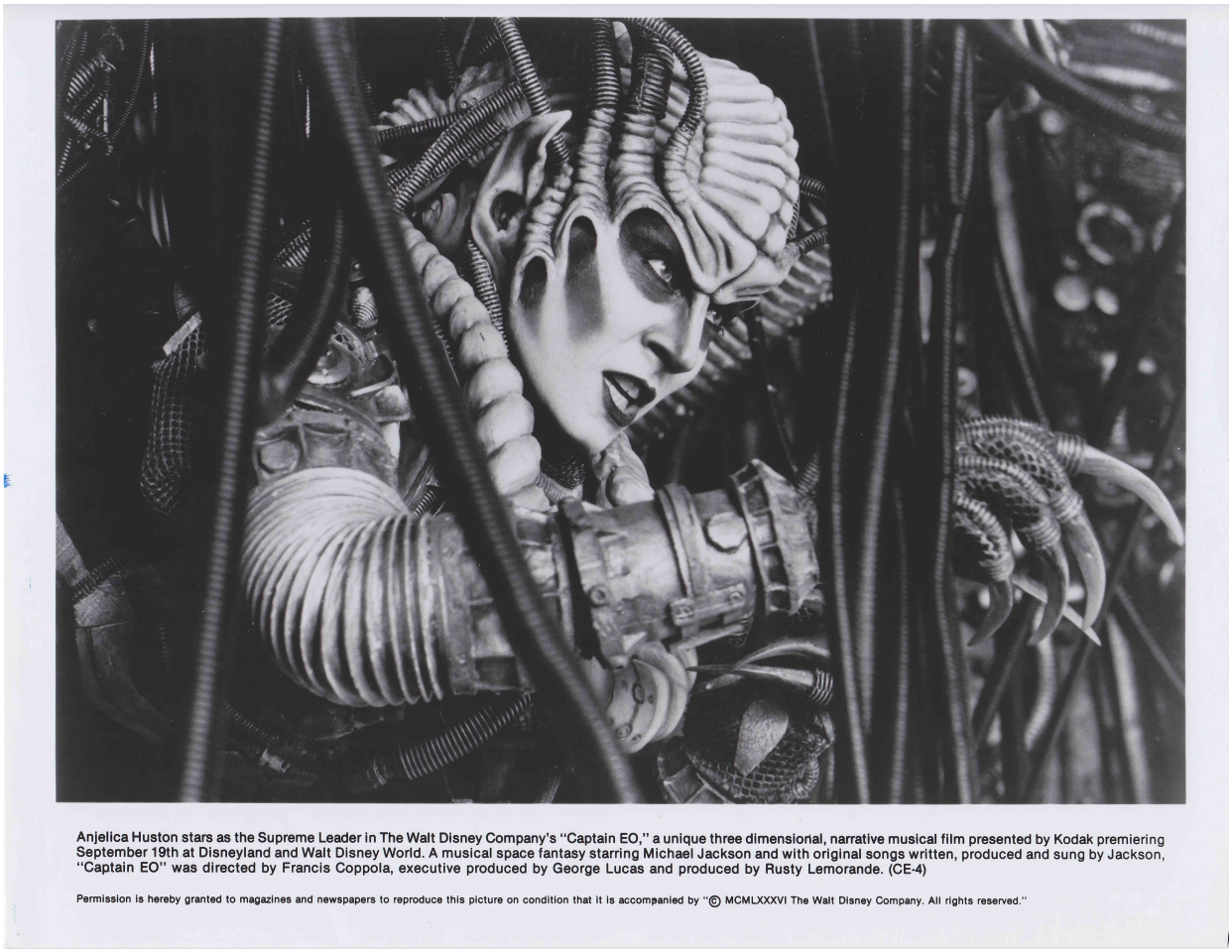
Figure 35. Press photo featuring Michael Jackson with Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas. (Walt Disney Company press photo)

Figure 36. Peacock symbol and description on the back cover of the *Destiny* album. (The Jacksons, *Destiny*, CBS JE 35552, 1978, 33 1/3 rpm)

Figure 37: Jackson and E.T. portrait on the cover of *Ebony*. (*Ebony*, December 1982)

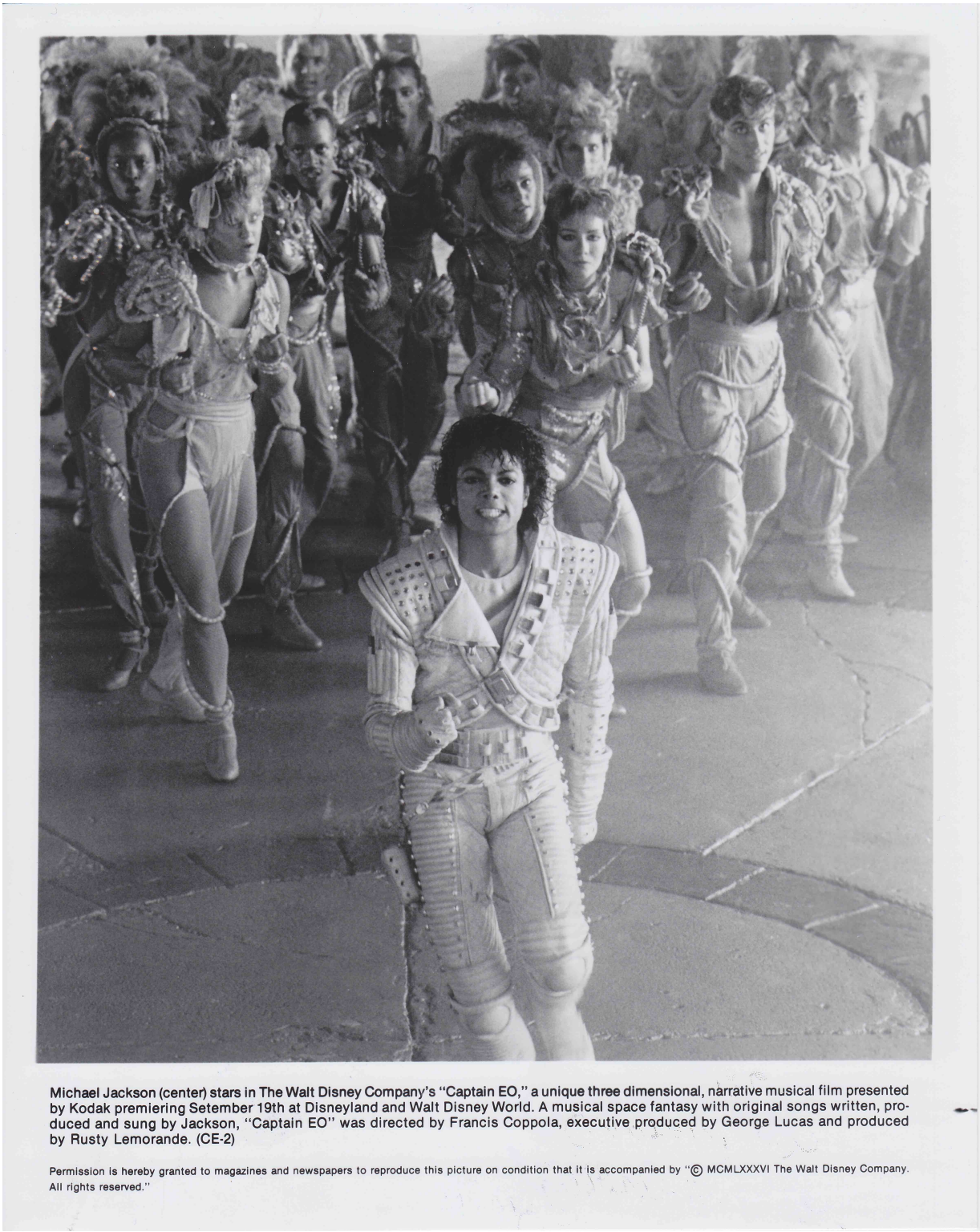
Figure 38. The Jacksons as space travelers. (The Jacksons, *Victory*, Epic QE 38946, 1984, 33 1/3 rpm. Painting by Michael Whelan)

Figure 39: Press photo of Jackson as Captain EO with the Fuzzball character. (Walt Disney Company press photo)



Anjelica Huston stars as the Supreme Leader in The Walt Disney Company's "Captain EO," a unique three dimensional, narrative musical film presented by Kodak premiering September 19th at Disneyland and Walt Disney World. A musical space fantasy starring Michael Jackson and with original songs written, produced and sung by Jackson, "Captain EO" was directed by Francis Coppola, executive produced by George Lucas and produced by Rusty Lemorande. (CE-4)

Figure 40. Anjelica Huston as the Supreme Leader. (Walt Disney Company press photo)



Michael Jackson (center) stars in The Walt Disney Company's "Captain EO," a unique three dimensional, narrative musical film presented by Kodak premiering September 19th at Disneyland and Walt Disney World. A musical space fantasy with original songs written, produced and sung by Jackson, "Captain EO" was directed by Francis Coppola, executive produced by George Lucas and produced by Rusty Lemorande. (CE-2)

Figure 41. Captain EO leads a phalanx of transformed dancers. (Walt Disney Company press photo)

Michael Jackson stars in The Walt Disney Company's "Captain EO," a unique three dimensional, narrative musical film presented by Kodak premiering September 19th at Disneyland and Walt Disney World. A musical space fantasy with original songs written, produced and sung by Jackson, "Captain EO" was directed by Francis Coppola, executive produced by George Lucas and produced by Rusty Lemorande. (CE-3)

Figure 42. Captain EO with the transformed Whip Warriors. (Walt Disney Company press photo)

Figure 43. Front of *Captain EO* premiere weekend t-shirt.

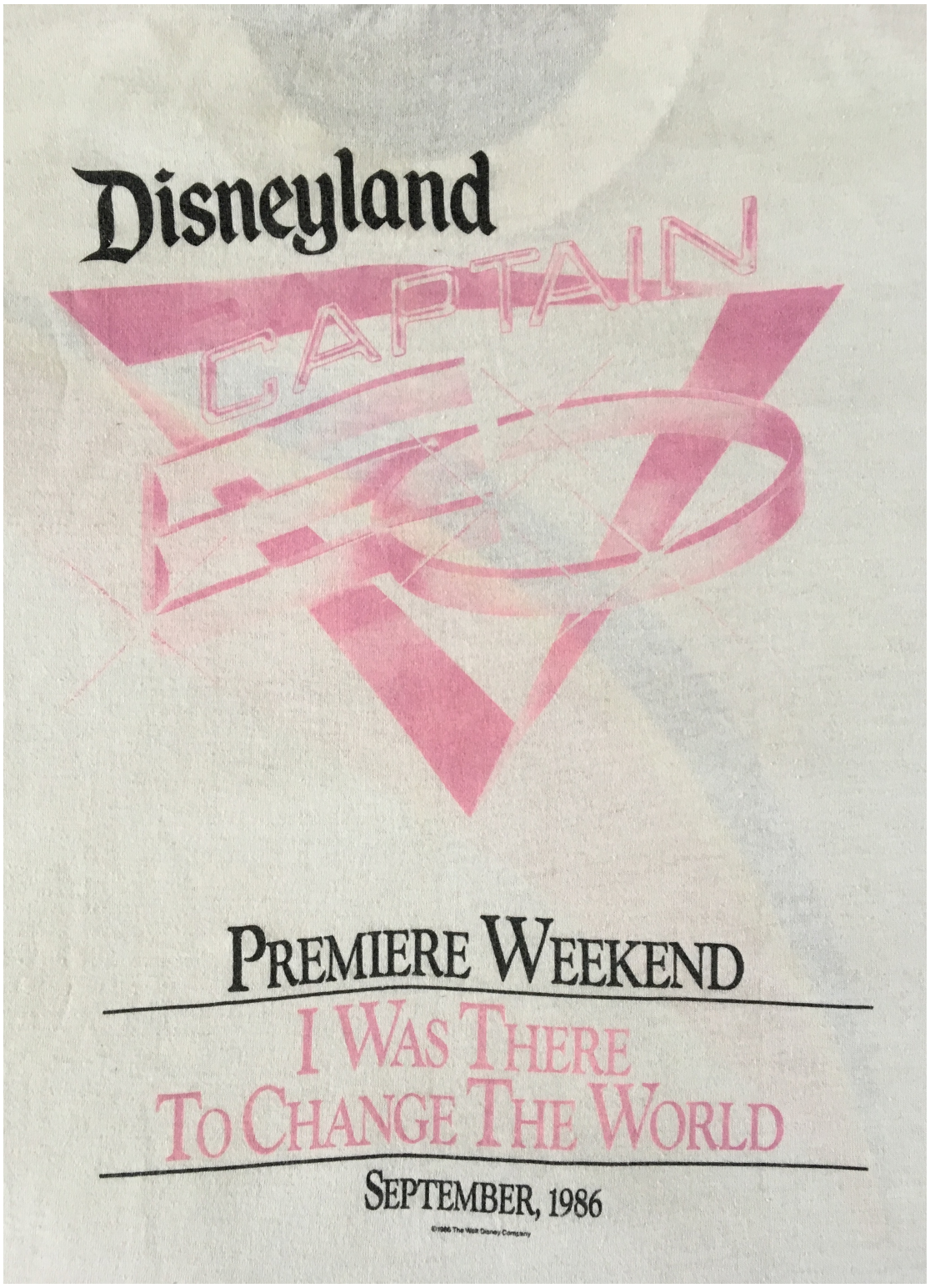


Figure 44: Back detail of *Captain EO* premiere weekend t-shirt.