



Kobena Mercer gets into black heavy metal

Good Days For Black Rock

Phallic, frantic and faintly juvenile, let's face it heavy metal does not exactly have a 'right on' reputation. Often regarded in liberal-left circles as retrograde, it's been dismissed as a musical genre beyond redemption, the last and most desperate resort of white male adolescents at their worst. Even the name of one of its best-known exponents, Whitesnake, manages to be racist and sexist at the same time!

Despite its miscegenated history, racism is rife in the music industry and it's a bummer for musicians and fans. But a new generation of black rock groups are changing that by redefining the rules of the game. Bands like Living Colour, Bad Brains and 24-7 Spyz in the USA and our own Roachford here in Britain kick out the myth that 'black boys don't play rock and roll' (to cite a lyric by white hard rockers Guns 'N' Roses). This is not a perverse marketing gimmick either: it's part of a growing scene reacting to the cultural apartheid on which the rock establishment is still based.

Formerly in jazz-funk outfits, guitar virtuoso Vernon Reid formed Living Colour, one of the leading black rock bands from New York, a few years ago. Negotiating the music business, Reid constantly came up against the corporate assumption that 'black rock' was a contradiction in terms, which is a bit rich considering the actual origins of rock in black American rhythm and blues. The irony, of course, is that blacks are marginalised (and in some places even unwelcome) in a genre they helped to invent in the first place.

In 1986 Reid activated the Black Rock Coalition, a network organising workshops, legal expertise and information (in effect a trades union) among black musicians who've chosen to work in what is still seen as an exclusively white male domain. *Vivid*, the 1988 Living Colour debut LP, recently went platinum.

The question is not so much why black musicians choose to work in 'white rock' (Jon Butcher, Kings X, Faith No

More, for instance), but why rock and soul are segregated along racial lines to begin with. A recent incident involving Guns 'N' Roses, current bad boy wonders of the hard-rock scene, shows just how resilient the 'racial' boundaries of white rock really are.

Like hyper-real cartoon characters, G 'N' R have created an image of mindless misogyny and nihilist menace with 'outlaw' attitude to spare - and lots of foul-mouthed swearing and cussing is an integral part of the 'attitude'.

When their singer Axl Rose tried finding a justification for the 'niggers, immigrants and faggots' slur in one of their songs, while opening a concert for the Rolling Stones in LA, it backfired when the following night Vernon Reid patiently replied, 'If you don't have a problem with gay people, don't call them faggots. If you don't have a problem with black people, don't call them niggers. I've never met a nigger in my life.' Notwithstanding the fact the concert was in the Compton area of Los Angeles - home of *bete noir* rap group NWA (Niggers With Attitude) - it points to the contradictory significance of 'race' in contemporary pop, rock and rap.

Most postwar pop has been based on a dialectic of black innovation and white imitation. One of the trends I've particularly enjoyed in the 80s has been the subtle subversion of the crossover traffic in this cultural (and commercial) dialectic. Black rap, hip hop and soul artists have been raiding the white-rock canon with no hang-ups about compromising their black 'authenticity'. Everything from Led Zeppelin and Steely Dan to Kraftwerk has popped up in the mix.

Groups like Run DMC, Public Enemy and De La Soul celebrate bravura confidence to cut and mix from a diversity of cultural resources with no need of white acceptance or approval. *Village Voice* critic Greg Tate has described this as a new 'freaky deke' sensibility in black aesthetics, an expression coined

from be-bop slang to emphasise an improvisational attitude that uses anything which comes to hand.

Black pop also claimed the electric guitar in the 80s, an act of re-appropriation that belatedly acknowledges the definitive role Jimi Hendrix played mixing up and moving between the arbitrary labels of rock, pop, jazz and soul. Tragically, Hendrix was caught up in commercial pressures over which he had little individual control: mimicked and ripped off by eager whites, ignored by indifferent blacks. Post-modern popsters like Prince, on the other hand, exert complete control over all aspects of their marketing in order to access a multicultural audience share. But the final product is often safe, bland and boring. The raw emotions generated by artistic risk are still found on the margins of the pop establishment, which is an exciting place to be these days - especially with Rasta hardcore band, Bad Brains.

Back in 79 a jazz-funk band in Washington DC decided to change direction after hearing the Sex Pistols. *Who Sez A Funk Band Can't Play Rock?!*, asked Funkadelic hoodoo-guru George Clinton, a major influence on the Bad Brains, who delivered a forceful reply. The entire post-punk style known as hardcore - with the accelerated riffs and 'noir' lyrics driven at lightning speed in bands like Anthrax and Metallica - was virtually created around the Brains, who've bounced back with a new LP, *Quickness*, and recent gigs in the UK.

Rasta heavy metal? No, it's not incongruous, it's rather wholesome and crunchy. Bad Brains are the only band I know who combine reggae dub and metal thrash to create a fast and furious sound that matches the intensity of their political commitment. There aren't any songs about bonking all night long. What you get is angry realism and empowered optimism, qualities emphasised in Living Colour too. When was the last time you heard a rock band protest slum land-



Bad Brains: Rasta thrash

lords or the Aids crisis like you felt they really meant it?

Politics have always been addressed in black music, but alongside the black bourgeois preoccupation of soul these days, politics have also largely disappeared from reggae too since Bob Marley's demise. Bad Brains have kept the apocalyptic fire of Rastafari alive, albeit within a genre more or less ignored by blacks.

I'm not a nationalist but I am rather happy about the reversal of the underlying 'crossover' relationship. As with their previous LP, *I Against I*, Bad Brains explore hybrid possibilities at



the point where opposites attract. *Human Rights*, a solo project by singer HR, goes even further as seemingly antagonistic forms blend into a new and unpredictable synthesis.

One effect of this intermix is that the similarities between hip hop and heavy metal become more salient than the differences. *Shut Up, Be Happy*, the anti-authoritarian rap that opens Ice-T's new LP, is more or less identical to histrionic rock epic *Holy Man's War* by Icon. And NWA, apparently, wanted to do a version of *Welcome To The Jungle*, the Guns 'N' Roses tune about

life on the margins of the late-modern underclass. Currently rock and rap groups in the US have something else in common: moral panic about 'offensive' lyrics have brought NWA and G 'N' R alike under fire from the New Right. But despite this and the aesthetic similarities, fans, audiences and markets are still segmented along racial lines.

There is not much that liberals or lefties will find 'ideologically correct' here, but don't dismiss it. Dispose of your stereotypes, because this is the soundtrack of more conflicts to come in the 90s. Shut up, be happy, get into it.