Crossover Appeal: Athletes, Artists, and Activists

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Usually I fear that the enterprise we call social media presages worldwide doom, but once in a great while I find it promises whimsical delight, as when a Facebook friend recently began posting seemingly random snippets of song lyrics. It's been a fun diversion identifying the songs and coming up with witty rejoinders while ignoring posts from others demanding that I "like" the American flag and join boycotts of the National Football League (NFL).

But it seems rare these days that a diversion stays fun for long. One of my friend's posts contained lyrics from "Substitute," the great 1966 single from British rockers The Who (long a personal favorite). On a lark, I looked up the Wikipedia entry for the song, mostly to see if it ever charted in the US (It did not, but it hit #5 in the UK.). Instead, I learned another lesson in the long, tortured tradition of American racism.

The Who's Pete Townshend's inspiration for "Substitute" was the 1965 hit "The Tracks of My Tears," by Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, which featured the line "Although she may be cute/She's just a substitute." The Miracles were just one of a slew of Detroit-based black bands in the 1960s "crossing over" to white audiences and, by going viral worldwide, converting the Motor City into the great arsenal of American songcraft. In "Substitute,"

Townshend and The Who recognized the musical debt, if only obliquely, with the line "I look all white, but my dad was black." Even this slight hint of race mixing was apparently too much for the record's distributors, however, who replaced the lyric in the US, Canadian, and South African versions with "I try walking forward but my feet walk back." Walk back, indeed!

It would be nice to conclude that we've come a long way since 1966, when "miscegenation laws" prohibiting interracial sex and marriage still existed in many US states. But as I write this on a Sunday, the weekly holy day for both Christians and football fans, the current controversy in the NFL — with President Trump and followers denouncing players for taking a knee (first, to challenge racial injustice, then, to challenge the president's mischaracterization of that as an insult to Old Glory and the troops) — has me wondering how far we've really come.

Take any given Sunday. In late 1963, as part of a lecture at Western Michigan University, Martin Luther King called Sunday morning "the most segregated hour in this nation." Lamenting that "the church is still the most segregated major institution in America," King suggested that "the first way that it can move out into the arena of social reform is to remove the yoke of segregation from its own body." Unfortunately, as *America* magazine reported in 2015, there's been little progress on this front over the past half-century: "Two in three (66 percent) Americans have never regularly attended a place of worship where they were an ethnic minority." Indeed, the "yoke of segregation" continues to define not only churches, but also neighborhoods, schools, and personal friendships.

Could the persistence of social segregation explain, at least in part, why so many white Americans do not, can not, and will not see the legitimacy of black complaints about the persistence — and even the exacerbation — of significant racial disparities in pay, employment, and our criminal justice system? Consider these facts: as *Bloomberg* reports, "In 1979, the average black man in America earned 80 percent as much per hour as the average white man. By 2016, that shortfall had worsened to 70 percent, according to research … from the San Francisco Fed, which found the divide had also widened for black women." Meanwhile, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the black unemployment rate is currently double the white, a figure that has remained consistent for years. Finally, our national nightmare of police-on-black violence has returned to St. Louis, where a white officer was again acquitted in the shooting murder of a civilian. Again, these are facts, but we cannot seem to agree on their reality let alone what to do about them.

In younger, more hopeful days, I used to believe in the power of popular culture — sports, music, movies, television — to promote racial equality. When I was growing up in an all-

white working-class city in the 1970s and ‘80s, my initial exposure to African Americans came indirectly via professional athletes and television stars. Black baseball players Lou Brock, Garry Templeton, Ozzie Smith, and Willie McGee were among my favorite St. Louis Cardinals, while “Fat Albert,” “Good Times,” and “The White Shadow” — all with black-centric casts — ranked high in essential weekly viewing. Meanwhile, American musicians seemed to hold the most promise for breaking down racial barriers, as Motown mainstays like Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye, hitmakers like Sly and the Family Stone and Earth, Wind, and Fire, and MTV superstars Prince, Michael Jackson, and RUN-DMC repeatedly “crossed over” to white audiences. I and my white friends loved them all.

Forty years on, I no longer see much liberatory potential in popular culture, which surely says less about our entertainment sector’s evolution than my own. But I do still believe that rooting for black athletes, listening to black musicians, and embracing the challenges of black television characters helped open my eyes to racial difference and discrimination, and clearly millions of other white kids experienced — and continue to experience — a similar popular education. Obviously, though, that’s not enough. In fact, as my colleague J.P. Shortall recently suggested (in a Facebook post, naturally), it might even prove counterproductive if whites encountering blacks as entertainers congratulate themselves for having overcome racism, eschewing more authentic, on-the-ground relationships.

Lately I’ve been listening a lot to Stevie Wonder’s 1970s output, impressed by how fresh his music still sounds forty years later. What’s less impressive, even downright disturbing, is that many of his topical songs — scathing critiques of structural racism, urban and environmental degradation, and political corruption — remain just as relevant today. 1973’s “Living for the City,” for example, which chronicles a young black man’s struggle with poverty, labor market exclusion, and police brutality, could serve as a Black Lives Matter manifesto (See my extended riff on this song at the Labor Song of the Month.).

The terms “crossover artist” and “crossover appeal” may seem quaint in today’s increasingly interracial cultural environment, but we still need crossing over, only this time by activists. What’s a crossover activist? Someone willing to move beyond the comfort zones of Facebook, faith, and family — to walk (forward and back) in other people’s shoes, to forge unfamiliar friendships, and to find the facts on the ground that undeniably demand our attention. There is no substitute for this difficult, challenging, but hopefully rewarding work. As crossover pioneer Sam Cooke appealed way back in 1964, “It’s been a long time coming, but I know a change is gonna come.”

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