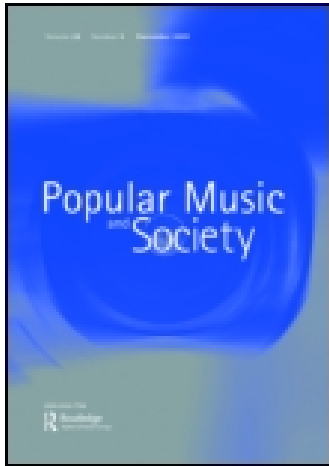


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“There’s No Home for You Here”: Jack White and the Unsolvable Problem of Blues Authenticity

Kimberly Mack

Jack White, a white singer and guitar player from Detroit who came of age in the 1990s, has frequently discussed the anxiety he felt during the White Stripes’ infancy while playing both Delta blues covers and his own blues originals. This article examines how White crafted a highly stylized visual image and a fictionalized autobiographical back-story for himself and drummer Meg White in order to direct attention away from the complex cross-racial history of his blues-based music. Using older white blues acolytes like Eric Clapton as a cautionary tale, embracing Pete Townshend and Pop art theory as foundational models, and conducting analyses of various White Stripes live and music video performances, this article explores White’s visual disruption of the white bluesman’s conventional autobiographical narrative.

In a March 2010 interview in *The Observer*, Jack White, formerly of blues-rock duo the White Stripes, stated that “with the White Stripes we were trying to trick people into not realising we were playing the blues. We did not want to come off like white kids trying to play black music from 100 years ago so a great way to distract them was by dressing in red, white and black” (Manzoor). Given his concerns about racial and temporal blues authenticity, White, a white man from Detroit who came of age during the 1990s, constructed an image that invoked childhood innocence and created a fictionalized autobiographical back-story for himself and drummer Meg White in order to protect the band from charges of cultural appropriation. In this article, I argue that White, through a clash of visual and musical signifiers, turned his White Stripes persona into a postmodern, Pop art performance. This extended *anti*-autobiographical performance demonstrates the arbitrariness of black blues signifiers and allows White to effectively signify on long-held, entrenched ideas of an authentic blues figure.

In order to advance this argument, I will first discuss the notion of blues authenticity, its inherent racial politics, and the question of who may legitimately play

the blues. I will then situate White within the circle of some of the country blues musicians with whom he is in conversation, focusing on Charley Patton and Tommy Johnson. Next, I will analyze generically marketed white blues autobiographies by Eric Clapton, Keith Richards, and Bob Dylan, which serve as a foil to White's disruption of a normative white blues autobiography.¹ I will continue to build my argument through a reconstruction of White's biographical transformation (or reinvention) from John Anthony Gillis to Jack White. I will follow this with a discussion of precedents for White's use of bright colors and modern style as a distraction from, and perhaps also a blurring of, the color line, in addition to a survey of white responses to American black music and American black style. Given that a large number of pre-eminent English blues rockers (Jeff Beck, Jimmy Page, Keith Richards, Eric Burdon, Eric Clapton) either attended art school or hung out with a London art school crowd, I will examine the connections between British Pop art and popular music, focusing specifically on the Who (Walker 15).

In the final section of the article, I will analyze Jack White's anti-autobiographical performance in the White Stripes' live versions of "Seven Nation Army" and "Death Letter Blues" at the 2004 Grammy Awards telecast; the official video for "Hardest Button to Button" from *Elephant*, which was directed by French filmmaker Michel Gondry, whose colorful, simple, minimalist style made for an easy fit with the White Stripes' visual image; and a 2006 *The Simpsons* homage to the "Hardest Button to Button" video.

Before I begin, it is important to clarify what I mean when I use the term autobiography. Historically, for most literary critics, autobiography was meant to be an independently verifiable, non-fiction, book-based endeavor. In *On Autobiography*, French theorist Philippe Lejeune discusses what he calls "the autobiographical pact", wherein a text can claim itself as an autobiography only if there is no distinction between the author, narrator, and protagonist (5). The autobiographical pact is, in fact, "a contract of identity" between author and reader that ensures the earnest veracity of the narrative (19). It is useful to consider the application of the autobiographical pact to a musician like White who constructs his autobiography through musical performance and his onstage and offstage persona, rather than in book form. In *Music Is My Life: Louis Armstrong, Autobiography, and American Jazz*, Daniel Stein effectively applies the autobiographical pact to "Armstrong's musical recordings, where the object of narration (the lyric I) and the performing subject (the singer enunciating the lyrics) are cross-referenced by the performer's name, face, and voice" (16). This use of the autobiographical pact can, therefore, extend to White's music, as well as his concert and music video performances and interviews.

In their essay collection *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson endeavor to take autobiography out of the traditional literary form and read it in everyday activities. In their introduction, they state: "Every day we are confessing and constructing personal narratives in every possible format: on the body, on the air, in music, in print, on video, at meetings" (2). This willingness to include music as a vehicle for autobiographical expression further provides a

framework for reading Jack White's unusual, non-book-based autobiographical performance during the White Stripes era.

Studies like Herbert Leibowitz's *Fabricating Lives*, Timothy Dow Adams's *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography*, and Paul John Eakin's *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* are essential when engaging a figure like White, as they recognize what they believe to be the necessary fictions (or lies) of an autobiographical text. Moreover, they also view the autobiographical work as a vehicle for creating a self. From this view, it is significant that the fabricated blues identity comes out of a tradition of tall tales and myth-making by black and white blues musicians alike. I will thus read Eric Clapton's, Bob Dylan's, and Keith Richards's autobiographies as examples of the autobiographical genre and as vehicles for the artists' self-invention, assuming that the subjective details delivered in these works may or may not be independently verifiable as "truth." Similarly, when Jack White advances the White Stripes' visual aesthetic, he is inventing personalities (selves) for himself and Meg White, thus performing an autobiographical act (or considering the subterfuge involved, an anti-autobiographical act) that allows him to participate in traditional blues self-fashioning.

Authenticity

For some of the most influential historians, scholars, and critics of the blues, including Amiri Baraka, Samuel Floyd, Eileen Southern, and Houston A. Baker, Jr., blues music is racially marked as black, and no non-black musician can, therefore, authentically play the form. Some theorists hold to the idea that blacks are uniquely positioned to play blues music due to a range of specific social and political experiences. This blues legitimacy might be expressed through certain tropes, including clothing (a natty suit and fedora), instrumentation (a particular type of guitar), and outlaw behavior (drinking, lawlessness, a wandering spirit). In *Blues People*, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) asserts that blues music "is a native American music, the product of the black man in this country: or to put it more exactly the way I have come to think about it, blues could not exist if the African captives had not become American captives" (17). In *Blues, Ideology, and African American Literature*, Baker also argues that black people's social and political experience has created a distinct cultural expression. According to Baker, "Black folk expression is a product of impoverishment of blacks in America. The blues, as a case in point, are unthinkable for those happy with their lot" (197). For these scholars, one must be black, from a particular geographical region, and of a certain socio-economic status in order to play the blues authentically.

There are blues scholars whose works offer a contrasting view of the so-called authentic blues and, by extension, allows for a wider range of people to participate in the blues tradition. *Shadow and Act* by Ralph Ellison, *The Hero and the Blues* and *Stomping the Blues* by Albert Murray, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* by Elijah Wald, and "Hear Me Talking to You: The Blues and the Romance of Rebellion" by Grace Elizabeth Hale are a few examples. All of these studies

avoid viewing blues music in racially essentialist terms. In fact, some of these texts discuss blues music in an interracial context, allowing for cross-cultural influence between blacks and whites. Additionally, not only do these texts argue directly against the engagement of blues music in sociological terms, but they also advance the idea of the blues as a professional musical style that allows its practitioners to work with, and be influenced by, other musicians and assert their individual musical will in the process.

Given the ongoing debates about racialized blues authenticity, Jack White, an artist who emerged at the end of the 20th century, encountered questions of blues legitimacy in a way that the previous generation of musicians did not. In the 1960s, Eric Clapton, the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, and other would-be young British blues rockers were in the odd position of introducing American blues music to a generation of American audiences. Given that most white American young adults had little exposure to blues music and that black American youth primarily deemed it old-fashioned, the British were not initially accused of cultural appropriation and blues inauthenticity (though these salvos would come later).² Jack White, on the other hand, anticipated those charges at the beginning of the White Stripes' formation.

Charley Patton and Tommy Johnson: Two Jack White Ancestors

When asked about his blues influences, Jack White most consistently mentions Charley Patton, Son House, Robert Johnson, and Blind Willie McTell. In fact, in the documentary *It Might Get Loud*, which features three generations of iconic guitar players (Jimmy Page, the Edge of U2, and White), he declares Son House's "Grinnin' in Your Face" his favorite song. In 2013, White's Nashville-based Third Man Records label, in collaboration with Document Records, released reissues of recordings by Charley Patton, Blind Willie McTell, and the Mississippi Sheiks on vinyl. Additionally, at the end of 2013, a partnership between Third Man Records and the John Fahey co-founded Revenant Records yielded *The Rise and Fall of Paramount Records 1917–1932, Volume 1*, a sprawling box set featuring recordings by classic black American artists such as Blind Lemon Jefferson, Louis Armstrong, Ethel Waters, and Ma Rainey in both vinyl and digital formats. In order to place White's goals for his blues music expression in its proper context, it is important to explore the artists who have directly or indirectly influenced him.

Despite what contemporary audiences might assume, White's imagistic gymnastics, his playfully unorthodox approach to his self-presentation, do not wholly set him apart from the Delta blues players. Some of these musicians share White's love of onstage and offstage showmanship (this is in stark contrast to other Delta bluesmen who had a more sedate performance style, sometimes due to blindness or advanced age during the 1960s blues revival) and a propensity for autobiographical trickery. Blues artists like Robert Johnson, Tommy Johnson, and W. C. Handy laid the groundwork for White to construct an invented biography for the White Stripes. One of the enduring legends about Robert Johnson is that he sold his soul to the Devil at midnight at a crossroads deep in the Mississippi Delta in order to become a guitar

virtuoso. Tommy Johnson, at least a decade earlier, supposedly did the same, and W. C. Handy may have bent the truth about the circumstances under which he composed his American popular blues standard “St. Louis Blues” (instead of writing the song among the gritty Beale Street hoi polloi, he allegedly composed it in his music publishing company office) (Ruark). Similarly, White maintains to this day that he and Meg White are siblings, despite the fact that the press uncovered both their marriage and divorce certificates more than a decade ago. As White admits, “Nothing that is said in an interview or onstage into a microphone—just like nothing in the Bible—should be taken literally” (Mulvey). In this way, White places himself within the tradition of the self-mythologizing bluesman through his use of autobiographical fabrication. The representation of Jack and Meg’s relationship as an innocent sibling bond, rather than an adult, post-divorce partnership, helps White to create an image for the White Stripes that subverts conventional notions of blues authenticity. This approach helps White sidestep charges of cultural appropriation, while the masking of his musical intentions through visual misdirection propels his anti-autobiographical performance forward.³

Charley Patton and Tommy Johnson were both consummate Delta performers who took pride in their ability to entertain crowds in juke joints, barrel houses, and at outdoor country dances. Most likely born “in April 1891 in the area between Bolton and Edwards, Mississippi,” Patton was an extremely important Delta blues originator (Gioia 49). Not only would Patton have a huge influence on the work of Son House, Tommy Johnson, Bukka White, Howlin’ Wolf, and Muddy Waters, but he was also a progenitor of what now are seen as commonplace, even clichéd, rock and roll stage antics. According to Ted Gioia, “Patton played the guitar behind his back, or between his legs, sometimes flipping it over, or snapping the strings, or tapping on it like a big drum. All the strutting and flaunting we associate with rock stars since Jimi Hendrix were already part of Patton’s repertoire in the 1920s” (51). Patton was a passionate entertainer, but his flamboyant style carried over into his personal life in the form of numerous run-ins with law enforcement (mostly having to do with public drunkenness), multiple marriages, and fighting and general hell-raising.

Patton’s stage shenanigans, his bold personality onstage and offstage, and the conflicting accounts of his biography make him in many ways White’s spiritual ancestor. As Gioia states, “Casual acquaintances often surmised that Patton came from the North. His brashness and assertiveness seemed so out of character for a black man from Mississippi” (49). Apparently, Patton was full of confidence or, depending on one’s view, braggadocio, particularly about his sexual exploits—Son House once complained about Patton, “You could hardly get a word in edgeways yourself, not when Charley [was] around. His woman yesterday, the day before yesterday, all what he done to the woman” (qtd in Davis 102)—and that confidence represented a sense of freedom that other blacks, facing stultifying oppression on many fronts, admired.

Tommy Johnson was another Delta blues singer who was heavily influenced by Charley Patton. He told his brother LeDell Johnson that he went to the crossroads with his guitar just before midnight and sold his soul to the Devil to become a better

guitar player (Palmer 59–60). And, according to Robert Palmer, Johnson “affected a trickster’s personality. He took to carrying a large rabbit’s foot around with him and displaying it often, and his performances were spectacularly acrobatic” (60). White, too, has a bit of the trickster in him, as he gleefully lies about his biography to the media and shape-shifts into a wild man onstage. Though he does not twirl his guitar or play it between his legs or behind his back, during live performances his body is in perpetual motion. He lunges forward and back, kicks out his legs, bows like a spasmodic folding chair, and bobs his head, at times quite violently, to the music. At times he attacks the guitar so viciously, in a manner reminiscent of Pete Townshend, that his guitar ends up covered in his own blood. This sanguine sacrifice serves as a signification of his commitment to the music, all the while cementing his own legend. White’s larger-than-life onstage persona also plays out in music videos and in on-camera interviews, serving as postmodern pastiche, an unruly mix of traditional blues mythology and 1960s British visual aesthetics.

Musical Autobiographies

In recent years, Eric Clapton, Bob Dylan, and Keith Richards have all published critically acclaimed autobiographies. Each was heavily influenced by blues music and, in the case of Richards and Clapton, they aspired to be what they perceived as so-called authentic bluesmen. Unlike Jack White, who relied on artistic tricks to free himself from the inevitable charge of white blues appropriator, these artists engaged the black bluesman tropes directly, participating in historical practices of racial mimicry.

Chronicles: Volume One by Bob Dylan, *Life* by Keith Richards (with James Fox), and *Clapton: The Autobiography* by Eric Clapton are Bildungsromane about the early formation of white blues players. As such, each book details the moment when the young blues acolyte discovers Robert Johnson for the first time. Dylan describes the “stabbing sounds” emanating from Johnson’s guitar and the numbness he felt after taking it all in (282–83). Clapton, on the other hand, experiences a sense of revulsion during his first exposure to Johnson’s music: “At first the music almost repelled me, it was so intense, and this man made no attempt to sugarcoat what he was trying to say, or play” (40). Jack White describes a similar response to Johnson’s music and the impact it had on his musical development in an interview with Kurt Loder on MTV.com. White explains, “somehow Robert Johnson really snapped something in my brain. I really felt like I had to find a way that I could play this music that felt so real and so cathartic for me, and figure out how I could attack that and share it with other people without getting this ‘white-boy blues’ thing labeled on me.” In these accounts, the writers use words like “repelled,” “numb,” and “snapped” to describe the visceral effect the blues sounds have on the listener, suggesting that the music provokes physical disorientation. This disorientation correlates with their own conflicted feelings about being white men wishing to play what they believe to be a black form of music.

Keith Richards is very explicit throughout his book about his youthful desire to be not only a bluesman, but a black bluesman, indicating that this was the goal for his

Rolling Stones band mates as well: “Chicago blues hit us right between the eyes. We’d all grown up with everything else that everybody had grown up with, rock and roll, but we focused on that. And as long as we were all together, we could pretend to be black men. We soaked up the music, but it didn’t change the color of our skin” (103–04). Even though Richards admits to wanting to change his whiteness at the start of his career, he acknowledges that he learned over time that it is unnecessary to be black to play the blues (104). Eric Clapton, on the other hand, appears to be particularly concerned about his authenticity as a blues musician, and he is stuck in racially essentialist notions about what constitutes blues authenticity.

In his autobiography, Clapton reveals acute anxieties about his whiteness in the context of playing blues music, and his actions serve as a cautionary tale for what can happen to a white blues artist who endeavors to function within the narrow confines of blues authenticity rather than subverting it. His self-consciousness is clear as he states, “The fact is, of course, that through my playing people were being exposed to a kind of music that was new to them, and I was getting all the credit for it, as if I had invented the blues” (64). He also shares his experience when Hendrix sat in with Cream in London in 1966: “It scared me, because he was clearly going to be a huge star, and just as we were finding our own speed, here was the real thing” (80). For Clapton, Hendrix is real because he is black. Clapton, in the role of the white negro, is fixated on black visual appearance as an indicator of musical authenticity.⁴ According to Ulrich Adelt, “Although Clapton began to identify with what he considered a white sound during his Cream stint, his search for a white identity coincided with his pseudo-Afro hairstyle, an imitation of either Jimi Hendrix or Bob Dylan, whose Jewfro did not need artificial enhancement, whereas Clapton had to resort to perms” (68). Clapton did what he could to temporarily override his whiteness, but his interventions were unsustainable. Clapton tried to change his physical image, particularly his straight hair, to appear phenotypically black. White, alternatively, embraced a long, floppy, and phenotypically white mane, while using an art aesthetic and invocations of childhood innocence to deflect attention away from his whiteness.

John Anthony Gillis Becomes Jack White

Jack White, né John Anthony Gillis, grew up the youngest of ten children (reportedly the seventh son)⁵ in a Catholic family in the lower-middle-class neighborhood of Mexicantown in Southwest Detroit, far away from the American South, the putative birthplace of American blues music. According to White, his high school, Cass Tech, was “90 per cent black kids,” and his peers at school and in his local community were more likely to listen to hip hop or house music than Americana (Perry; Fricke; Scaggs).

At 15, Gillis was apprenticed to a local upholsterer and family friend named Brian Muldoon. Muldoon introduced White to garage and punk bands like the MC5 and the Cramps, and the duo formed a garage band called Two Part Resin (and later the Upholsterers) with Muldoon on drums and White on guitar. In 2000 they released a 7" single called “Makers of High Grade Suites.” When Gillis’s apprenticeship with

Muldoon ended, he eventually formed his own upholstery business, Third Man Upholstery, for which he created a yellow, black, and white visual aesthetic where everything from the van he drove to his business cards bore those colors. By this time, Gillis was familiar with electric blues artists Howlin' Wolf and Willie Dixon and blues-rock band Led Zeppelin; however, blues music did not resonate deeply with him until he heard acoustic country blues from the Mississippi Delta (Perry; Loder; Scaggs; "Jack White").⁶

When Gillis was still a teenager, a friend introduced him to the music of Son House:

He played me "Death Letter," and then this a cappella song, "Grinnin' In Your Face." I heard the song I'd been waiting to hear my whole life. It said, "Don't care what people think. Your mother will talk about you, your sister and your brothers too. No matter how you try to live, they're gonna talk about you still." We had a big family, I didn't have that many friends, and I was paranoid. I thought everybody was talking about me all the time. (Perry)

It was Gillis's introduction to artists like Son House and Robert Johnson, rather than the electric blues figures, that allegedly inspired him to play blues music: "If people really love music, they're going to start being drawn toward honesty, and if they're drawn to that, it's a direct line right back to Charley Patton and Son House. I'm very skeptical of musicians who say they love music and don't love the blues" (Phipps). However, not only was he tentative about playing amplified country blues music from his 21st-century, white, urban subject position, but he was also loath to be lumped in with aging 1960s-era white blues rockers Eric Clapton, Keith Richards, Jimmy Page, and Jeff Beck, or, worse, find himself tethered to a deeply uncool contemporary white blues revivalist like Joe Bonamassa.

Gillis's wariness of the "white-boy blues thing" played a significant role in his approach to his own band, the White Stripes (Loder). After teaching his then-wife, Meg White (Jack White took Meg's racially inflected last name as his own), a simplistic, almost childlike drumming style, White saw an opportunity to form an under-the-radar blues duo. White surmised that evoking the cultural innocence of childhood might circumvent charges of cultural appropriation: "I would feel really fake sitting down, adopting a black accent, and singing about trains or something. My easy way out of that is to just go into childhood, because that honesty seems to reflect the same nature that the blues was reflecting. That's my way of getting involved in that tradition" (Phipps). When White talks about the blues, he frequently uses variations of the words truth and honesty. As self-consciously constructed as the White Stripes were, White places a high value on, if not a purist's view of blues authenticity, then perhaps a punk-rock truthfulness, according to which brashness and raw emotion are privileged commodities. White's focus on childlike honesty also reinforces the idea of the Delta country blues being a simple, incorruptible, and perhaps innocent form of music. In this context, the blues emerges during the "childhood" of American popular music. While few scholars would disagree with the notion that formal blues structure is simple, more than a few would offer the caveat

that the musical form is deceptively simple, with originators, like Patton, laying the groundwork for completely new musical forms such as rock and roll and, arguably, hip hop (Palmer 18–19; Davis 3–5).

White's alignment with the Delta blues players, in particular, placed him in a unique quandary. The country blues artists, who emerged early in the 20th century but were not recorded until the 1920s and 1930s, worked largely as field hands in the agrarian Jim Crow South amid extremely harsh racial, political, and socio-economic circumstances. Even the natural environment was dangerous, unpredictable, and destructive, with country blues artist Charley Patton and classic blues artist Bessie Smith notably memorializing the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 in "High Water Everywhere" and "Homeless Blues," respectively. The amplified blues, on the other hand, is the sound of the African-American Great Migration: not only a transition from country life to northern city life, but the sound of African-Americans definitively entering modernity (Wilkerson 10). White, coming from Detroit, a site of much of that black northern migration, had to figure out how not only to cross race-based boundaries to achieve blues authenticity, but to overcome regional, class, and temporal boundaries.

Rather than attempting to emulate the visual style of black Delta blues figures, White constructed an image that appears antithetical to the black Mississippi Delta blues figure. With 1960s Pop art rockers the Who, the 1920s Dutch De Stijl Arts movement, and the Western Pop art movement as foundational models, White cultivated a highly stylized red, white, and black visual aesthetic.⁷ This color palette is used not only for the White Stripes' stage clothing, but also for their instruments, stage gear, backdrops, lighting, and marketing materials. White explains:

[T]he White Stripes' colors were always red, white and black. It came from peppermint candy. I also think they are the most powerful color combination of all time, from a Coca-Cola can to a Nazi banner. Those colors strike chords with people. In Japan, they are honorable colors. When you see a bride in a white gown, you immediately see innocence in that. Red is anger and passion. It is also sexual. And black is the absence of all that. (Fricke)

White's inclusion of the Coca-Cola can and the Nazi banner as two historical examples of the use of the red, white, and black color palette is notable, as both items are highly political. The former is a symbol of Western capitalist mass production and the latter a signification of 20th-century Western fascism. White was very clear about the political and psychological work these colors perform, so it follows that he would choose them in order to challenge his audience to recognize the instability of traditional blues signifiers.

Jack White Goes Pop!

The Pop art elements of White's White Stripes-era performances are striking because they provide a framework wherein White negotiates questions of racial authenticity. Emerging in Britain in the late 1950s and in America in the early 1960s, Pop art, according to Simon Frith and Howard Horne, took "seriously as artists the people

involved in designing cars and furniture, producing packages and pop stars.” It advocated that “fine artists too should apply the aesthetic lessons learned from a study of mass culture, using in their own work the organization of colour and shape found on the streets and the billboards, incorporating mass-produced images into their own individual statements” (104). By the end of the 1950s, Pop art theory had made its way into British art schools. The British art school system profoundly affected a generation of British rock musicians who came of age during the 1960s.

A partial list of soon-to-be-famous British musicians who attended art school during the heyday of Pop art in the late 1950s and 1960s reads as a Who’s Who of rock royalty: Syd Barrett (Pink Floyd); Ray Davies (the Kinks); Pete Townshend (the Who); Charlie Watts, Ron Wood, and Keith Richards (the Rolling Stones); Jimmy Page (Led Zeppelin); Jeff Beck; John Mayall; Eric Clapton; John Lennon (the Beatles). Not only did a significant number of British rock stars (many of them blues rockers) attend art school, but some (the Who, the Rolling Stones) took the Pop art ethos to heart as they sought control of selling their own images.

During the late 1950s and 1960s, fashion became an important pathway for the successful manipulation of one’s rock-and-roll visual presentation. According to Frith and Horne,

The history of rock, in Britain at least, is a history of image as well as sound, a history of cults and cultures defined by clothes as well as songs. Whether in pursuit of authenticity or artifice, romantic truth or postmodern paradox and pastiche, musicians use the language of fashion, and this may be the point at which art schools have their most important musical impact. (18)

The teddy boys and the mods were important British working-class youth subcultures that emerged during this timeframe and impacted fashion trends that resonated with future rockers. Both demonstrated an affinity for black American music, while crafting a bold visual style through fashion. In the 1950s, the teddy boys, whose name derived from the updated Saville Row aristocratic Edwardian suits they wore, became infatuated with rock and roll, a form of music that sprung in part from rhythm and blues, a black musical form. The mods emerged in the 1960s, and, like the teddy boys and the white negroes before them, appreciated black American music, including soul and R&B. Style was also important to this group, though there was a stark contrast in dress between themselves and the teddy boys. According to Dick Hebdige, “Unlike the defiantly obtrusive teddy boys, the mods were more subtle and subdued in appearance: they wore apparently conservative suits in respectable colours, they were fastidiously neat and tidy. Hair was generally short and clean” (52). The mods were more respectable than the teddy boys, though they still fell into disfavor with the older generation, particularly parents and the media. The Who, a self-professed mod band with Pop art sensibilities, became an important model for Jack White and the White Stripes.

The Who titrated their embrace of black music and culture with a heavy dose of art-school theory. Frith and Horne state, “Townshend himself . . . saw his own musical

activities in terms of performance art, which meant seeing the Who's stage act itself as the moment of artistic creation and exploring the constraints on this Townshend was a remarkably self-conscious pop performer, unusually able to articulate what his shows were about" (101). Townshend's course of study at art school exposed him to Pop art theory, and he referred to the Who as a Pop art band, blurring the lines between high and low culture, art and commerce:

The importance of Townshend's use of Pop art rhetoric (and what distinguished him from the r & b bohemians) was that it referred not to music-making as such—to the issue of self-expression—but to commercial music-making, to issues of packaging, selling and publicizing, to the problems of popularity and stardom. (Frith and Horne 101)

This is how Townshend and White are similar: Neither musician is conflicted about being an artist and a product at the same time, as they are firmly in control of their own images and cultural productions.

The Who and the White Stripes, however, faced different concerns when it came to racialized musical authenticity. The Who took a commercial approach to what can be seen as commercial music (Motown/soul). Berry Gordy and Motown self-consciously took a contemporary pop (secular) approach to gospel music, so the Who's "maximum r & b" did not have the same problem with canon and authenticity that Jack White faced with the White Stripes' mythologized version of the blues. In this context, framing Motown was no different than Andy Warhol's Campbell's soup cans. If Pop artists incorporated mass-produced images into their work, the Who could incorporate those types of images into their own efforts—or even make the commodity themselves. The White Stripes were engaging an iteration of blues music that was neither contemporary nor commercially mainstream in a 21st-century urban context. White's affecting a Pop art performance while playing blues music to evade the role of white appropriator was thus much more of a gamble.

White also displays a specific self-consciousness about his visual presentation. The White Stripes' second record, *De Stijl*, is named after the post-World War I Dutch art and design movement that prized formal simplicity, relying on the use only of primary colors, along with white and black. White has noted the De Stijl movement's influence on the Whites Stripes' approach to their performance and their music:

We walked into a drugstore and saw this bag of peppermint candy and I said "That should be painted on your bass drum because you've been drumming like a little kid" I was really into furniture design for that [his time as an upholsterer] and I liked Gerrit Rietveld—he did a red-blue chair for De Stijl. And it really had meaning to me and to the band and the music and the aesthetic of our live performance. (Harrington)

The White Stripes' visual aesthetic exists on a continuum. It starts with De Stijl, a Dutch offshoot of Dada, with Dada being one of the incubators of Pop art.⁸ According to McCarthy, "Dada's irreverent and iconoclastic attitude, as well as its willingness to accept almost anything into the realm of art, certainly aided in the development of Pop"

(17). And it is Pop art that invokes the Who as an artistic precedent for the White Stripes and Jack White's "irreverent and iconoclastic" autobiographical performances (17).

The White Stripes in Performance

When the curtain rises on the White Stripes' performance of their hit "Seven Nation Army" at the 2004 Grammy Awards telecast, the audience hears the familiar (now ubiquitous at sporting events across the world) bass-like riff of White's down-tuned, octave-pedal-reinforced 1950s Kay hollow body archtop (White is well known for his love of vintage instruments and analog recording techniques). In a theater-in-the-round at the Staples Center in Los Angeles, California, Jack White wears a black t-shirt, trousers with one red leg and one black one, and red shoes. Meg White is dressed in a black sleeveless top and white pants (Figure 1). Strobing black and white circular targets bounce off the black scrim behind them. Meg's drum kit, notably the drum head on her snare and bass drums, feature red and white peppermint swirls, and the amplifiers, too, are red. "Seven Nation Army" is an up-tempo, contemporary rock song with little in the way of blues or even blues-rock flourishes, so the bottleneck on White's left pinky finger, at first, seems incongruous.

From the beginning of the Grammy performance, the band's color palette is on full display through their instruments and light show, but the cartoonishness of the Stripes' appearance is captured most starkly through their clothing. On this occasion, the Stripes wear mainly black and white with a hint of red (Jack's pants leg), choosing to include the color red mainly through their stage gear, but in other performances the color red might predominate. The style of clothing also changes depending on the venue (stage performance, interview, promotional materials, album cover). For instance, instead of Jack wearing a t-shirt and trousers, he might wear a Grand Ole Opry Nudie suit during a photo shoot.⁹ When Frith and Horne discuss clothing as an important component of rock music in a British context, with musicians speaking the "language of fashion" (18), the argument can certainly extend to American bluesman Robert Johnson's iconic pinstriped suit and fedora and White's emulation of that style during his tenure in the White Stripes and in his solo career. The White Stripes' art school conceptualization, by way of De Stijl and Pop art, is expressed through bold primary colors, along with black and white, and a playful, though always stylish, sensibility.

After two verses of "Seven Nation Army," something unexpected occurs. The White Stripes launch into a frenetic version of Son House's "Death Letter Blues," initiating a spectacular clash of musical and visual signifiers. The Son House tune is traditional, rural, Mississippi Delta: *acoustic*. The simple fact that Jack White is plugged in while playing the song presents a stark contrast between pre-modernity and technology. White plays his Kay (a favorite, along with his red JB Hutto Montgomery Airline guitar), a vintage guitar and, considering that artists like Jimmy Reed and Howlin' Wolf played the same guitar, a blues music signifier; however, the guitar is electric rather than acoustic. Since White is playing an electric guitar that is associated with amplified Chicago blues artists, the signifiers are all mixed up. The bottleneck slide fits

more easily in a song that originated in a Delta blues framework, as it is a signifier of both Delta and urban blues (Blind Willie McTell, Son House, Muddy Waters, and Elmore James each used a bottleneck at one time or another). Over time, the slide became a rock signifier with Duane Allman of the Allman Brothers Band serving as an important conduit, so the fact that White plays with it during the “Seven Nation Army” guitar breaks makes sense, in retrospect. White’s use of the Kay and the slide, signifiers of old or vintage equipment, as well as the blues, suggest that White is playing in a legitimate blues style. These items are signs of blues purity.

But every other signifier at play systematically dismantles any claim to blues authenticity. The peppermint swirl on Meg’s drums signifies candy, which evokes children or childhood innocence. The swirl also raises the specter of advertising, with colorful toys incessantly marketed towards children of all ages. Although White equates the honesty of children with the truth he has suggested emanates from the blues, childlike imagery (or crass commercialization) is not a standard element of the blues tradition (Phipps). It was not commonplace, for instance, for Delta or urban blues musicians to sing about children or childhood or wear clothing that evoked the same. The corporate Grammy crowd and the theater-in-the-round staging in the middle of the Staples Center, a 20,000-seat arena that houses NBA and NHL sports teams and hosts world-famous pop, rock, country, R&B, and hip-hop acts, are certainly at odds with this early 20th-century, rural song that in its time period was commercially unsuccessful. But, more than those factors, it is through the color scheme and the lighting set-up that the White Stripes’ Grammy performance highlights their postmodern, Pop art style. The swirling black and white targets, alternating between circular and square-shaped, turn red, as does the entire backdrop, as soon as the



Figure 1 The White Stripes at the 46th annual GRAMMY Awards.

Source: Photograph by Lester Cohen, *Meg White and Jack White of the White Stripes*. 2004. WireImage. © 2004 GettyImages.

opening riff of “Death Letter Blues” begins. The red is blinding and the now colorful targets are reminiscent of Jasper Johns’s 1955 Dada painting *Target with Four Faces*. The painting features four faces (from the nose down) above a green and yellow target set against a red background (McCarthy 18). According to McCarthy, Johns’s piece paved the way for Pop because he “painted these shapes in a gestural, though nonetheless representational style, that simultaneously emphasized the painted and objective, or created and factual, qualities of the resulting work” (19). This juxtaposition between what is real and what is constructed is the undercurrent of much of Jack White’s creative output during the White Stripes era. Peter Blake, an important Pop artist, painted another target in 1961, as a homage to Johns’s impact on Pop, called *The First Real Target?* That painting has a black, white, blue, red, and yellow target set against a brown background, with the title of the painting at the top (McCarthy 19).

Just as “Seven Nation Army” contains musical signifiers of rock, including White’s use of effects pedals like the DigiTech Whammy, the guitar solo at the end of “Death Letter Blues” speeds up so fast that it almost sounds like hardcore rock rather than Delta blues, or even urban blues. White’s willingness to mix and match the visual and musical signifiers in this Grammy performance, apparently, offended some blues purists. According to White:

When we played our first shows, a lot of people were really mad at the colours we wore. To me, how we presented ourselves was to show people how stupid it is for them to think that, to play authentic blues, I’d have to dress like I’m from fucking Mississippi. Eric Clapton, for example, said he didn’t like The White Stripes. He thought we were having a laugh about Son House, playing ‘Death Letter’ on the Grammys. People in that Stratocaster white blues scene didn’t understand that we could dress in red and white and black, play in the simplistic way we did, and still be the blues. (Mulvey)

White’s use of the red, white, and black color scheme while playing a Delta blues cover on a national (even international) stage demonstrates just how arbitrary the signifiers of so-called authentic blues are. According to the statement just cited, for White, the blues is, above all, about honest expression, and as long as he and Meg are delivering their version of the truth to an audience, they are playing the blues. What they wear (and specifically how region affects their fashion) or how their stage is set up has no bearing on their ability to play blues music.

In the White Stripes’ official video for “Hardest Button to Button,” directed by French filmmaker and music video director Michel Gondry, Jack White is wearing the same outfit he had worn on the Grammy show. Additionally, he is pretending to play his red Airline guitar instead of the Kay. Meg, however, is dressed differently. She is wearing a red tank top and black pants and is also barefoot. The video uses stop-motion animation and shows Meg and Jack playing music in the streets of New York City and in the PATH train station. What is unique about this video is how self-referential it is. The video visually simulates the song’s musical sounds. Jack and Meg move forward a step on each beat, with multiple Jacks and Megs appearing and disappearing in time to the music. Michel Gondry states, “When I heard the song, it

was so incredible, I knew I had to do the video. It's the shape of the song that gave me the idea. The pattern, how it goes 'doot-doot-doot, doot, doot, doot, doot, doot.' This makes me think of 1, 2, 3, 4 ... 4, 8, 12, 16 ... 2, 4, 8, 16, 32" (Kaufman). The colorful and playful nature of the visuals draws attention to the constructedness of the video, underscoring the Pop art dichotomy of the concrete and the imaginary. Due to the stop-motion effect, Jack and Meg are rendered ethereal blues-rock fantasy figures.

Even more striking than the video is *The Simpsons*' homage to the "Hardest Button to Button" video in the "Jazzy and the Pussycats" episode (airdate: 17 September 2006). This episode signifies on the source material, once again underscoring Jack White's and the White Stripes' self-conscious visual presentation in service of showing their audience the precarious nature of blues authenticity. Bart Simpson becomes obsessed with practicing the drums, and one day while drumming in the street, as "Hardest Button to Button" plays in the background, he literally runs into the White Stripes. The episode uses the same stop-motion animation from the original video, and, because Meg and Jack are also drumming in the street, the trio crash into each other at an intersection. Meg and Jack are wearing the exact same outfits from the video, while Bart is wearing an orange t-shirt with blue shorts and blue shoes. His drum kit is blue. It is notable that the show's director gave Bart a color scheme as well. At the start of the clip, Bart drums from home to the school bus (the driver comments: "Ooh trippy") to school and beyond, multiplying on the beat like the original video.

The White Stripes, Pop Art, and Aesthetic Depoliticization

Is it a positive or a negative outcome for the White Stripes to find themselves depicted as cartoon characters on *The Simpsons*? Within the context of Pop art, the White Stripes' trajectory from cartoonish live action figures to actual animated figures on an iconic television program is the logical next step. Given that an important element of Pop art is the artist's embrace of mass culture, the White Stripes' intentional cartoonish self-representation for a mass audience falls neatly within Pop art principles. And it is the White Stripes' Pop art performance that helps them forge a blues identity, despite their complicated racial, class-based, and historical challenges. White discovered that his band could overcome a potential political obstacle with an art project. But what was the effect? The White Stripes used Pop art to playfully appropriate (and depoliticize) highly political Nazi aesthetics, while also misrepresenting the complicated racial history of the blues. After all, behind the blues authenticity discourse stands genuine racial, political, and socio-economic oppression.

When White asserts that red, white, and black are "the most powerful color combination of all time, from a Coca-Cola can to a Nazi banner," should audiences be alarmed that White is invoking a fascist regime that similarly set out to solve what they saw as a political problem with a powerful visual aesthetic *vis-à-vis* fashion and propagandistic film and media production? In her 1975 article, "Fascinating Fascism," Susan Sontag laments Nazi Party filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl's then-recent social and political rehabilitation. She believes that audiences are willing to accept whitewashed

accounts of Riefenstahl's past due, in part, to the Pop art movement. With the erosion of the division between high and low culture, audiences are able to view "Nazi art with knowing and sniggering detachment, as a form of Pop art." Sontag continues: "The ironies of pop sophistication make for a way of looking at Riefenstahl's work in which not only its formal beauty but its political fervor are viewed as a form of aesthetic excess." Pop art's apolitical orientation allows for audiences to engage with images that in other contexts may be unpalatable. As a result, a Coca-Cola can or a Nazi banner can be aesthetically pleasing if a Pop artist inserts the image into a larger work of art or an audience member decides to read the image through a Pop art lens.

Did the White Stripes' use of Pop art visuals distract their audience from pertinent concerns about race and the blues, or did they simply enact a liberating free play of musical and visual signifiers? When Clapton suggested that the White Stripes were "having a laugh" about Son House, he missed the point entirely (Mulvey). They were not laughing at Son House; they were responding to the joke of signification around race and blues authenticity. White asserts, "I always said that if you can't handle how the White Stripes looked, then we can't be in this room together sharing this same music. Don't bother with us, go find a different band" (Mulvey). White created a postmodern hybrid of the early- to mid-20th-century blues figure as seen through the lens of a 1960s British visual aesthetic to create a new type of white blues band. White's efforts allowed him to sort out the audience members who did not get the joke, and that tactic served the band well during their 14-year run.

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Notes

- [1] It is important to note that there is a body of autobiographical literature by black American blues musicians, including *Father of the Blues* by W. C. Handy and *Blues All Around Me* by B. B. King and David Ritz. An earlier generation of white musicians like Mezz Mezzrow (*Really the Blues*, written with Bernard Wolfe) has also engaged the blues in their autobiographies.
- [2] In the late 1950s and into the mid-1960s, blues music was not mainstream, with its audience being comprised mainly of American folk revivalists who focused on acoustic, country blues to the exclusion of amplified, urban blues. Jones's *Blues People* and Ellison's *Shadow and Act* were two books that also demonstrated early 1960s interest in blues music.
- [3] White masks himself *out* of blackness as opposed to the historical literal and figurative blacking up discussed, for example, in Lott's *Love and Theft* and Lhamon Jr.'s *Raising Cain*.
- [4] In 1957, Norman Mailer wrote a controversial essay for *Dissent* called "The White Negro." He defines a white hipster persona whose interest and participation in black American music is a way of solving his shared existential crisis: life versus death, rebellion versus conformity. Mailer claims: "So there was a new breed of adventurers, urban adventurers who drifted out at night looking for action with a black man's code to fit their facts. The hipster had absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro, and for practical purposes could be considered a white Negro." Mailer further suggests that whites are attracted to black cultural expression and black style out of the recognition that black people are somehow more alive and, therefore, have better access to their emotions. It follows that this black core, uncontaminated by modernity, makes for a less inhibited artistic expression.

- [5] In African-American folklore, the seventh son of a seventh son is blessed with the gift of clairvoyance. See *The Souls of Black Folk* by W. E. B. Du Bois.
- [6] See also Wald, *The Blues*; Davis, *The History of the Blues*; Palmer, *Deep Blues*; Murray, *Stomping the Blues*.
- [7] Pop art is now viewed as one “large, Western movement in the arts” (McCarthy 8–14). So when I discuss the movement, I will talk about it as one Western movement rather than differentiating between the British and American versions.
- [8] As McCarthy notes, Dada “dated to the years of World War I and often embraced nihilism and an anti-art aesthetic in protest against the civilisation that gave birth to the war” (16).
- [9] Nudie Cohn was a tailor who designed country and western suits for Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, among many other celebrities.

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