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All Shook Up: Elvis, Bo, and the White Negro in Tennessee Williams's *Orpheus Descending*

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Orpheus Descending , Tennessee Williams's 1957 rewrite of his unsuccessful 1940 play *Battle of Angels*, provides a seminal reading of the burgeoning genre of rock 'n' roll.[1] *Orpheus Descending* recasts Val Xavier, the dictionary-toting poet of *Battle of Angels*, as an itinerant musician. By creating a protagonist who recalls Elvis Presley, Bo Diddley, and other early rock luminaries, Williams (perhaps unwittingly) positioned himself as the nation's first "rock critic," predating the advent of that formal classification by nearly a decade.[2] Val's intimate knowledge of African-American blues enhances his appeal as a racialized representation of blackness —but also establishes a sexual/spiritual dichotomy that runs as a fault line through the play. Williams's recognition of the powerful appeal of African-American culture, codified through a white character and packaged for a white audience, offered a then-rare social commentary on rock within a conventional literary forum.

¶2 In his essay on the incorporation of blues and jazz motifs in Williams's early writings, Nick Moschovakis observes that the playwright's "taste for the music was formed in tension with contemporary attitudes toward its African-American cultural origins, attitudes that were primitivist and essentially racist, and that Williams to a large extent shared" (15–16).[3] Moschovakis's argument may be extended to *Orpheus Descending*, which draws upon *Battle of Angels* for core ideas. Yet if *Orpheus Descending* bears the stamp of an earlier era, it also reflects its immediate historic context. The play is clearly in dialogue with Norman Mailer's 1957 essay "The White Negro," an imperfect but influential expression of contemporary white male perceptions of African-American masculinity.[4]

¶3 Mailer's "white Negro," an urban hipster, was born of a *menage-a-trois* among the bohemian, the juvenile delinquent, and the African American—the latter responsible for bringing "the cultural dowry" (Mailer 340) of music, language, and attitude. Mailer's formulation provides a point of entry for reading *Orpheus Descending* as a rock literature text. The blues is the key to how Williams defines his protagonist, a device that lends Val emotional depth and heightens the play's pathos. Early rock musicians borrowed heavily from the themes and styles of the blues (and rhythm and blues) to enhance their own idioms of country and swing.[5] With "white Negroes" like Elvis Presley as spokesmen, early rock 'n' roll thrived on the blatant appropriation of black rhythms and culture and the redistribution of this "dowry" to a largely white audience.

¶4 *Orpheus Descending* also reflects other sources—from American literary archetypes to classical myths. The play centers on the hypnotic effect of a "mysterious stranger" on the middle-aged wife of a sickly merchant. Val is an incarnation of the "confidence man" so common in American literature—an attractive, free-spirited, manipulative character who transforms the lives of lonely people. In *Battle of Angels*, Val is a rebel/poet whose key accessories are a dictionary and a snakeskin jacket. In *Orpheus Descending*, Williams retains Val's jacket but replaces his dictionary with a guitar. A symbol of both sexual prowess and spiritual depth, the guitar has been autographed by blues musicians. In his reconfiguration of Val as a proto–rock 'n' roll musician, Williams

astutely recognizes that tensions surfacing in the burgeoning rock industry parallel those in rural Two Rivers County, where the "white Negro" represents both salvation and threat.

¶5 Williams also borrows heavily from the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, so his inclusion of a musician as protagonist seems an obvious choice. Literary critics have focused attention on the relationship between *Orpheus Descending* and its mythological precursor while paying cursory attention to the play's use of popular music iconography. In the following sections, I will explore the points of correspondence between Val and such contemporary musicians as Elvis Presley and Bo Diddley. The attributes and accessories of rock 'n' roll proved a natural fit for classic tragedy, allowing Williams to stage a debate about race, class, and sexuality within the framework of emerging popular culture.

¶6

Creating the Mystiques

Val charms the women of Two Rivers County through a carefully cultivated mystique, symbolized by trappings that include a snakeskin jacket and a unique guitar. His appeal lies partly in his mysterious past as a lounge guitarist. Although he is thirty years old and claims to have relinquished ties with his past nightlife, he drops hints that he could return to his old ways. Val is pursued by Carol Cutrere, a lost soul in search of identity or love. Characterized by critic John Clum as "strangely made up like a punk before her time" (136), Carol is attracted to Val by her conviction that they are both of "the fugitive kind" (117): rebels who refuse to be bound by life's quotidian constraints. Carol is convinced that she once had a one-night stand with Val; she remembers his snakeskin jacket and recalls asking him, "What on earth can you do but catch at whatever comes near you with both your hands until your fingers are broken?" (21). Val's coy attitude when responding to Carol's story suggests deeper mysteries and similar revelations—the sort of secret knowledge that Mailer argues is a source of power for the Negro and, by extension, the white Negro.

¶8 The snakeskin jacket becomes a metonymic identifier for Val, who is known as "Snakeskin" when he performs. In the Orphic myth, the Muses salvage Orpheus's severed head, which continues to sing in a testament to the transcendence of the spirit. Similarly, in Williams's play, the Conjure Man rescues the snakeskin jacket after the authorities execute Val. Carol exchanges her ring for the jacket in a symbolic passing of the torch: "Wild things leave skins behind them, they leave clean skins and teeth and white bones behind them, and these are tokens passed from one to another, so that the fugitive kind can always follow their kind" (117). Judith Thompson notes that Carol's association of the snakeskin jacket with "the fugitive kind" also links it to a brotherhood of "idealist purveyors of love, freedom, and brotherhood, who would deliver humankind from lives filled with frustration, alienation, and oppression, but who are continually persecuted by the forces of hatred, bigotry, and violence, or betrayed by their own carnal needs" (162). Although music critics had not defined the rock audience in such terms by 1957, fans of subgenres such as punk, heavy metal, and alternative rock would subsequently adopt a similar fugitive mythology as a unifying motif.

¶9 Despite the relative centrality of the snakeskin jacket, Williams suggests that Val's guitar is his most valued possession. The guitar can be read, as it often is in rock parlance, as a phallic symbol; not surprisingly, it also acts as the calling card that announces Val's ties with African-American culture. Val's guitar enhances its potency through the autographs of Leadbelly and Fats Waller, blues performers whose influence on rock 'n' roll could be measured with relative ease in 1957. However, the guitar also suggests intimacy; Carol tells Val that

she desires "to hold something the way you hold your guitar, that's how I'd love to hold something, with such—*tender protection*! I'd love to hold you that way, with that same—*tender protection*!" (57).

¶10 Downplaying the sexual implications of the instrument, Val instead claims to see the guitar as his "life companion," a sort of spiritual redeemer that "washes me clean like water when anything unclean has touched me" (37). Val's autographed guitar functions as a bridge between the temporal and the spiritual worlds, simultaneously providing a portal that invites sexual indulgence and a channel that harnesses artistic creativity and internal reflection. To explain how his guitar embodies these seemingly contrasting roles, Val notes that he has "lived in corruption but I'm not corrupted" (37).

¶11 At the time of publication of *Orpheus Descending*, a similar sexual/spiritual paradox was being explored by numerous popular musicians from the South, including Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Johnny Cash. These musicians were firmly grounded in gospel roots, initially developing a love for music through the church. As such, they released their versions of gospel standards along with decidedly more temporally themed songs. In the real-life stories that were playing out before the public's gaze, music remained the bridge between the two worlds. Rock performers found themselves adrift in a world of temptations afforded by wealth and fame (e.g., they "lived in corruption"), yet their musical upbringings anchored them to a strong spiritual base (e.g., they were not corrupted). I argue that these tensions, albeit in a somewhat simplified conception, were clearly palpable in popular music when Williams was refitting his protagonist for *Orpheus Descending*. Moreover, the playwright shrouds the resolution to this paradox in vague suggestion, a strategy that heightened the mystique for many burgeoning rock 'n' roll musicians.

¶12 The spiritual/sexual dichotomy is a cornerstone of Val's presentation and heightens his appeal to the women of Two Rivers County. Val arrives in town under questionable pretense, so his carefully cultivated image in part reflects secrecy necessary for self-preservation. Yet he also recognizes that selective disclosure of the facts creates a certain degree of power; sympathetic listeners are invited to imagine the parts of his story that remain unclarified. When Lady finds herself attracted to Val despite her better instincts, she wonders whether the suggestiveness that informs his mystique *is* the basis of his appeal: "everything you do is suggestive . . . of what you said you was through with" (45).

¶13 Lady notes later that she has been touched by Val's "strangeness"; Val represents the classic outsider, seemingly uncommodified and unburdened. Val's mystique is sufficiently appealing to take on a life of its own, even when belied by the facts. For example, Val admits to Carol that he stole the watch that he wears (although he seems to be plagued with guilt over the theft) (58), an indication that he has criminal proclivities and may be in Two Rivers County to evade the law. Yet this revelation concerns her far less than when Val temporarily retires his snakeskin for a uniform more appropriate to a man working in a mercantile store: "You've taken off the jacket that said: 'I'm wild! I'm alone!' and put on the nice blue uniform of a convict" (59). Although Val may deserve to wear the uniform of a convict, it is the symbolic death of his mystique that reverberates most deeply with Carol.

¶14 When Lady wonders about Val's "suggestiveness," she is really questioning the influence of his mystique. When Williams was reconfiguring his protagonist, a similar tension was being illuminated on television screens across the country, where censors were debating the "suggestive" sway of Elvis's hips. In video footage of his performances from the 1950s, Elvis never overtly mimics sexual motions, but his gyrations are suggestive of something beyond the hula hoop. When offset by Presley's boyish charm and affability, however, these

gyrations became all the more mysterious—and more appealing to thousands of female fans. It is worth noting that Lady never alludes explicitly to the images that Val's presence draws in her mind; the suggestion alone carries a silent promise that would be broken by vulgar expression. Perhaps Williams had learned a lesson from Presley's popular success. His earlier play, *Battle of Angels*, contained a much more explicit interchange between Val and Myra, in which Val's suggestiveness becomes almost matter-of-fact and loses the appeal of the forbidden:

> MYRA. Also your attitude is very suggestive.
>
> VAL. Suggestive of what, Mrs. Torrance?
>
> MYRA. Bedrooms, if you want to know.
>
> VAL. Bedrooms!
>
> MYRA. Yes!
>
> VAL. That sure is peculiar. How do I do *that*?
>
> MYRA . Everything that you do. The way you talk, the way you walk, every single motion of you. Slew-footing this way and that way like one of those awful, disgustin', carnival dancers! (165).

¶15 Interestingly, Williams makes no attempt in *Orpheus Descending* to reconcile the disparity between Val's sincerity and his "suggestiveness." Rather, he simply allows his protagonist to embody a seemingly contradictory combination of spirituality and sexuality. Presley's mixed messages, on the other hand, prompted *Toast of the Town* host Ed Sullivan to issue a disclaimer on national television in January 1957, reassuring the American public that Elvis was a polite, upstanding young man.[6] This disclaimer followed a mesmerizing performance of the gospel standard "Peace in the Valley." (Similarly, Val at one point plays Williams's nostalgic, gospel-like poem "Heavenly Grass"[7] for Carol Cutrere.) During his first Sullivan appearance, on September 9, 1956, Presley was televised in full view during the more "suggestive" parts of "Hound Dog" and Little Richard's "Reddy Teddy." According to Trendex ratings, 82.6 percent of the television audience tuned in to watch Elvis—indicating that his gyrations commanded the attention of more than a few viewers (Guralnick, *Last Train* 338). By the time of his 1957 appearance, his third on the show, Elvis was shown from the waist up each time it appeared that his left knee might begin to wiggle (Cotten 123).

¶16 Presley's modest public persona, whether natural or contrived, contributed to his mystique, especially when contrasted with his sexual overtones. Presley often seemed wounded by accusations of lewdness, and he defended his stage mannerisms variously in 1956 as follows: "I'm not trying to be sexy. It's just my way of expressing how I feel when I move around. My movements are all leg movements. I don't do nothing with my body" and "I don't believe that I'd sing the way I do if God hadn't wanted me to. My voice is God's will, not mine" (qtd. in Guralnick, *Last Train* 286, 331). Invocation of an emotional muse or a spiritual connection provided Presley with a plausible, yet engaging, answer to questions about sexual aspects of his performance.

¶17 When Carol questions Val's self-proclaimed righteousness, he seems wounded by her implications and replies by stating that his guitar playing was never about exhibitionism, for he just "wants to live and does not care if they know I'm alive or not" (27). Admittedly, it is difficult to tell whether Val is truly modest or using a false modesty to achieve his ends of seduction and secrecy; nonetheless, his crafted reserve only heightens his mystique. While Elvis cannot be read as a direct stand-in for Val, I argue that Williams was inspired by the tensions that Presley revealed, both as a performer and a personality.[8] In addition to highlighting a

sexual/spiritual dichotomy whose solution remained somewhat vague, these tensions were linked with an emerging re-vision of African-American culture, as discussed below.

Re-Writing African-American Culture

In *Orpheus Descending*, Williams elides male sexuality with an ability to incorporate identifiers from other races and ethnic groups. As a white man, Val's threat (and appeal) derives to a great extent from his ability to convey a deep connection to black American culture, symbolized physically by the autographs of legendary blues musicians that adorn his guitar (Clum 136). While the burgeoning rock 'n' roll scene likely inspired Williams to create this overt symbol, he clearly intends for his audience to link Val's sexual energy to non-white ethnic identifiers. His stage directions at the outset of the play suggest that Val emanate "the kind of wild beauty about him that the [Conjure Man's wild Choctaw Indian] cry would suggest" (16). Perhaps not surprisingly, this orgasmic howl, which concludes with "a series of barking sounds that rise to a high sustained note of wild intensity" (16), shares ground with a standard rock 'n' roll songwriting strategy: the building of tension followed by the ecstasy of release.

¶19 As does Mailer, Williams ultimately delivers a reductive conception of black American culture in *Orpheus Descending*. Both writers overemphasize perceived aspects of the African-American experience that are linked with sex and danger, and their readings of black culture capture a fraction of the complexity and richness of African-American life. When considered in isolation, this selective viewpoint provides a convenient plot device for Williams's tragedy. However, Williams overlays this selective characterization with an emerging recognition of the tension that ensues when individual cultural elements become translated and reconfigured, a subject that Mailer largely ignores. I argue that Williams drew inspiration from the Elvis phenomenon to inform this aspect of his play.

¶20 Raised in the Mississippi Delta, Presley integrated black and white cultures into a somewhat ambiguous package that was part hipster and part hillbilly. Throughout his career, he remained true to his roots, both physically and ideologically. Rather than marginalizing or subduing his ties to black culture, Presley embraced them, a trait played for effect by his producer, Sun Records head Sam Phillips. According to Presley biographer Peter Guralnick, the musician seemed to recognize that African-American culture encompassed principles far loftier than sex and danger: "Phillips thought he sensed in Elvis . . . someone who shared with him a secret, almost subversive attraction not just to black music but to black culture, to an inchoate striving, a belief in the equality of man" (Guralnick, *Last Train* 134).[9]

¶21 Guralnick's reading of Presley echoes the sole passage in *Orpheus Descending* in which Williams uses Val to comment directly on black culture. When he describes the guitar autographs to Lady, Val's commentary focuses as much on the racially motivated injustices that Leadbelly and Bessie Smith had endured as it does on the artists' impact on music and culture. Val's statement that Leadbelly played his guitar "so good he broke the stone heart of a Texas governor with it and won himself a pardon out of jail" (37) suggests that Williams recognizes the emotional power and depth of the music. Perhaps not surprisingly, Val imbues all of the musicians with spiritual power. Each is "immortal" or has a name "written in the stars," and legendary jazz bandleader "King" Oliver is described affectionately as the greatest horn player since Gabriel (37). However, Val's observation that "John Barleycorn and Jim Crow killed Bessie Smith, but that's another story . . ." (37)

suggests that, for the purpose of *Orpheus Descending* at least, Williams will not explore the depth of African-American music and culture beyond that necessary to make his point.

¶22 Williams's and Mailer's imperfect attempts to grasp the subtleties of African- American culture nonetheless highlighted an important trend for the 1950s: that African-American culture was rapidly being deconstructed, rewritten, and reconfigured to satisfy a growing interest from white communities. Rock musicians often found themselves on the front line of the reappropriation, as they could selectively retain elements from the black recordings they often covered. When covering songs written and performed by black musicians, Elvis embraced the original versions more fully than did his contemporaries, such as Bill Haley. Whether he recognized it or not, Elvis hit upon a magic formula by demonstrating a closeness with the original recordings that was sufficiently dangerous to be appealing.

¶23 By contrast, Haley, a contemporary performer from New England, took care to remove "suggestive" references from his versions of black recordings, thus deliberately distancing himself from the songs' cultural origins. For example, Haley fundamentally altered Big Joe Turner's "Shake, Rattle, and Roll" by replacing Turner's opening couplet, "Get out of that bed/And wash your face and hands" (Calhoun) with "Get out from that kitchen/And rattle those pots and pans." Haley's version carefully eliminates all suggestion of the bedroom. In fact, Haley seemed to desire total distance from any accusation of lewdness, for he noted: "We steer completely clear of anything suggestive! We take a lot of care with lyrics because we don't want to offend anybody. The music is the main thing, and it's just as easy to write acceptable words" (qtd. in Gillett 21). Turner's version of the song topped the chart in 1954; Haley's cover rose to no. 7 the same year. Interestingly, Elvis's 1956 cover (unreleased at the time) retains Turner's opening lines. Presley's willingness to be linked with black culture, as suggested by his choice to follow Turner instead of Haley, cannot be discounted as a factor that helped him to carry his look and sound to dizzying heights of popularity.

¶24 Mailer prophesied that "it is not granted to the [white Negro] to grow old gracefully" (352), a prediction that holds true for Val and for many of the rock performers from the mid-1950s. Val is not afforded the opportunity to grow old; at the conclusion of *Orpheus Descending*, a mob of local men immolates him with a blowtorch. He remains stubbornly independent until the end, refusing to relinquish his guitar and jacket and assimilate into the local culture. Faced with the realization that he should leave Two Rivers County, Val re-dons his snakeskin jacket (which he had temporarily quit wearing when he took a job in the confectionary), announcing to Lady, "I come and I go in this jacket" (105). While Val's untimely death nullifies the issue of his aging, the reader can speculate, from the start of the play, that his attitude and history will likely catch up to him at some point. As Elvis aged, he encountered difficulty sustaining his popularity and maintaining his image. As Allison Graham notes, "The overdetermined nature of [Elvis's] persona guaranteed a certain 'slippage' in his public reception and enabled political players of the era to manipulate his image for divergent purposes" (116). Presley reached midlife in the public consciousness, although he never fully regained the cultural potency that he enjoyed in his early days of fame.

¶25 Although Williams could not foresee it in 1957, Presley would remain "unreconstructed" throughout his life, making little effort to shed his southern persona and assimilate into mainstream America. Through his stubbornness, notes Graham, "Elvis signified an unrepentant ignorance, a menacing—even virulent—strain of hillbillyism" (117) that ultimately led to his typecasting in a series of poorly received films that tarnished his credibility by making him an object of self-parody. In the eyes of Hollywood, Presley was "Guilty by reason of

class, and class [was] in turn guilty by reason of racial impurity" (Graham 129)—a statement that could as easily be applied to Val.

Tennessee Williams and the "Bo Diddley Beat"

The Elvis phenomenon was inescapable in the mid-1950s, and Williams was likely inspired by Presley when updating his framework for *Battle of Angels*. In some ways, Presley was Val Xavier writ large—virile yet sensitive, poorly educated yet charming, likeable yet dangerous. The extent to which Williams drew inspiration from other rock figures of the era, whether African American or white, cannot be ascertained from the play. However, Williams's characterization of Val invokes several attributes popularized by African-American rock pioneer Elias Bates, known as Bo Diddley. It is reasonable to assume that Williams and Diddley were not deeply familiar with each other's work—but the similarities in imagery suggest at least a common precursor or a shared conception, further strengthening the argument that *Orpheus Descending* may be read as a rock text.

¶27 Diddley, a native of Mississippi, created an African-influenced shuffle beat (subsequently dubbed the "Bo Diddley beat") that became a true rhythmic backbone for rock music (Gillett 31). Like Val, Diddley also played a unique guitar. Although not autographed *per se*, Diddley's oblong, square, pointed, fur-covered, leather-bound, rocket-tailed, custom-built Gretsch electric guitar stood out when compared to the standard Gibson and Fender instruments favored by almost all other early rockers. Diddley deployed his guitar as a visual focal point, a phallic identifier whose shape alone suggested a distinctive style.

¶28 Furthermore, if any early rock performer were to be given the nickname "Snakeskin," it would most certainly be Diddley. Often clad in a snakeskin jacket, Diddley extensively mined the phallic potential of snake imagery in his music. His signature song, the sexually swaggering boast "Who Do You Love" (1956), begins with the lines "I walk 47 miles of barbed wire/I use a cobra-snake for a necktie/I got a brand new house on the roadside/Made from rattlesnake hide" and continues to use snake imagery throughout. Now in his seventies, Diddley continues to perform and be photographed in the snakeskin jacket that has been his trademark for more than fifty years.

¶29 Along with classic singles, Diddley released a memorable string of albums whose titles (such as *Bo Diddley Is a Gunslinger* and *Have Guitar, Will Travel*) played off of and bolstered his legend as a traveling outlaw. The veneer of suggestion in Diddley's music from the mid-1950s is remarkably thin; his songs are rife with easily decipherable euphemisms and codes. For example, there can be little question as to the referent for "somethin' in my pocket" in Diddley's 1955 hit, "I'm a Man." Val similarly implies that he did more than just play guitar in his New Orleans heyday; his coy self-characterization as "the entertainment" suggests prowess both musical and sexual. While many of Diddley's contemporaries, such as Buddy Holly, refitted his musical style into a wholesome context, Diddley's conscious invocation of a freewheeling, larger-than-life persona gave him a threatening edge that ultimately bolstered his popularity.

¶30 Val's untimely demise at the conclusion of *Orpheus Descending* is the result of a plethora of factors, although one can infer that his open invocation of African-American culture did not endear him with local men. The reader never learns what becomes of Val's guitar, the ultimate signifier of his status as a white Negro. Presumably, it is destroyed in the fire; in any case, it does not survive as a symbol of his presence.[10] Instead, his snakeskin jacket becomes the legacy that will presumably contribute to his legend.

¶31

In the decades following Williams's play, rock has grown to encompass a much broader spectrum of sounds and styles, thereby diluting the contribution from Negro sources and predecessors. (Although exceptions exist, the majority of rock musicians post-1960 are white, and relatively few have been influenced primarily by black artists). Yet white Negroes have flourished in rock for fifty years, evidenced through Mick Jagger's bluesman's posturing, Led Zeppelin's amplification of Willie Dixon, or Kid Rock's contemporary collision of Hank Williams with Muddy Waters. When Axl Rose relocated the white Negro to Los Angeles in Guns N' Roses' highly influential *Appetite for Destruction* (1987), his protagonists read like meaner, more defiant versions of Val Xavier. When the narrator of "Night Train," a celebration of the underbelly of the Los Angeles community, describes himself as "a West coast strutter" and "one bad mother," the listener is hardly surprised to find that the speaker "has a rattlesnake suitcase under [his] arm" (Rose and Hudson). Thus, the snakeskin imagery lives on; the Negro mystique made popular by the likes of Bo Diddley survives to influence subsequent white musicians just as Val's jacket will presumably inspire future rebels.

Was Tennessee Williams the Nation's First Rock Critic?

As noted earlier, formal rock criticism did not exist when Williams published his play. Thus, his sentiments cannot be positioned against those from then-contemporary rock critics to determine whether the two groups were in dialogue. However, it is clear that Williams recognized a visceral connection between performers such as Elvis Presley and his protagonist, Val Xavier. Val is neither a mirror image of Presley nor a reconfiguration of Bo Diddley or any other specific rock performer. However, in *Orpheus Descending*, Williams recognized that the tensions stirred by the arrival of a racialized white Negro figure could be dramatized by configuring that character as a proto–rock musician. Williams saw rich dramatic potential in rock 'n' roll, a subject beyond the purview of all other playwrights and prose writers who had published for an adult audience by 1957.

¶33 Approximately a decade after the publication of *Orpheus Descending*, there was an explosion in the number of works of American dramatic and prose literature that demonstrated ties to rock music or its culture. Beginning in 1966, rock influenced the subject matter and/or writing style of numerous works aimed at adult audiences, including Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1969), Sam Shepard's *The Tooth of Crime* (1972), and Don DeLillo's *Great Jones Street* (1973), Prior to 1965, however, rock was essentially absent from adult-themed literature, making Williams's play an anomaly for its time. Perhaps it is not surprising for rock 'n' roll to appear in a play relatively early in the style's infancy, as the genre featured larger-than-life personas who blended seamlessly into visual media such as film and television. Nonetheless, Williams was entering uncharted waters when he immersed a rock-inspired character into a literary discussion of race, class, and sexuality in 1957.

¶34 Thus, *Orpheus Descending* provides a seminal example of the incorporation of rock 'n' roll elements with standard literary tropes. Although his depiction of Val Xavier as an itinerant musician seems somewhat stereotypical by current rock standards, Williams clearly sensed that a rebellious persona, signified through rock trappings, could be deployed to explore existing racial and class tensions. Although Williams could not foresee it in 1957, the early years of rock 'n' roll would eventually acquire an aura much like that surrounding Val Xavier. Carol cries: "This country used to be wild, the men and women were wild and there was a wild sort of sweetness in their hearts, for each other, but now it's sick with neon" (103). Rock music since 1960 has more fully acknowledged the postmodern condition by becoming increasingly diverse, more intricate, and more

fragmented, and the incorporation of the music into subsequent literary works reflects these numerous shifts. However, *Orpheus Descending* represents the first step along this ever-widening path of the literature of rock, capturing a moment when rock 'n' roll began to extend its influence beyond its target audience and into cultural discourse.

Notes

[1] In the 1950s, rock 'n' roll had yet to breach the adult literary market. Although limited insight could be found in popular magazines directed at teenagers, thoughtful adult-oriented analysis of the genre was rarely offered beyond brief snippets in trade publications, such as *Billboard* and *Cashbox*, or commentary on an album jacket.

[2] In the context of this essay, I define "rock criticism" as any form of commentary that analyzes the genre or select musicians within literary, artistic, historical, or cultural contexts. "Rock critic" and "rock journalist" were not formal career options until the late 1960s, following the advent of such publications as *Crawdaddy!* (1966) and *Rolling Stone* (1967).

[3] *Orpheus Descending* is a text that unquestionably employs what Toni Morrison describes as "American Africanism," a literary trope that uses a "carefully observed, and carefully invented, Africanist presence" that serves as "both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability" (6–7). Morrison also observes that such an imagined Africanist persona was used "to articulate and imaginatively act out the forbidden in American culture" (66).

[4] Mailer's essay is one entry in a tradition of what Andrea Levine calls "white negroism," an American tradition of interracial desire and fantasy that encompasses a wide range of creative expression, from blackface minstrelsy to Elvis Presley to popular interracial male "buddy" films. The centrality (and limitations) of Mailer's essay can be measured in terms of the critical response that it has invoked. For example, in his famous rebuttal, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," James Baldwin questions whether Mailer's middle-class, Jewish upbringing qualifies him to make assumptions about the African-American perspective.

[5] Charlie Gillett's *The Sound of the City* provides an in-depth exploration of the ways that early rock incorporated precursor styles (*e.g.*, blues, R&B, country and western, swing).

[6] After congratulating Presley on his performance, Sullivan shook Elvis's hand and stated: "I wanted to say to Elvis Presley and the country that this is a real decent, fine boy . . . we want to say that we have never had a pleasanter [sic] experience on our show with a big name than we've had with you. So now let's have a tremendous hand for a very nice person" (qtd. in Guralnick, *Last Train* 379).

[7] "Heavenly Grass," described by Judith Thompson as a poem "whose lyrics not only express a desire for transcendence from earthly life but also suggest nostalgia for a Wordsworthian preexistence from humankind that is painfully exiled at birth" (162), appears in Williams's 1956 poetry collection *In the Winter of Cities*.

[8] Before settling on Marlon Brando for the part of Val in *The Fugitive Kind* (the film adaptation of *Orpheus Descending*), Williams expressed his desire to cast Elvis Presley for the role. Some of Presley's associates have indicated that he was actually offered the role and later regretted not signing, but this cannot be verified.

[9] Phillips, who stated that his goal was to record "genuine, untutored negro" music, actively sought artists who were "Negroes with field mud on their boots and patches on their overalls . . . battered instruments and unfettered techniques" (qtd. in Guralnick, *Last Train* 5–6). Phillips reflected in a 1988 interview on his signing of Elvis: "[W]e hit things a little bit, don't you think? I went out into this no-man's-land, and I knocked the shit out of the color line" (qtd. in Guralnick, *Last Train* 134).

[10] On the first hardback edition of *Orpheus Descending* (New Directions, 1958), the guitar survives in cartoon representation on the book's spine. However, the drawing is stylized to suggest an acoustic country-and-western guitar rather than a rock-inspired model. This depiction of the guitar suggests an almost comic instrument: non-threatening, safe, more likely a source of campfire yodeling than of incendiary passion.

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