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“The Forgotten 15 million”. What happened when the radio industry realized it could make money out of African Americans and their music (1950s-1970s)

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8/ “The Forgotten 15 million”. What happened when the radio industry realized it could make money out of African Americans and their music (1950s-1970s)

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***ABSTRACT:** The article aims to revisit the history of « black radio » in the United States. After World War II, African Americans gradually emerged as meaningful consumers in the eyes of white entrepreneurs looking for new market opportunities. The entire subfield of black-oriented radios was then created to attract black customers with what was identified as their music (blues, rhythm'n'blues, gospel, etc.). However, these economic strategies fueled an opportunity for African American disc-jockeys who used their position as a gateway to the market to redirect the purpose of black-appeal radios from money-making to community-organizing.*

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***ABSTRACT:** L'articolo si propone di rivisitare la storia della “radio nera” negli Stati Uniti. Dopo la Seconda guerra mondiale, gli afroamericani emersero gradualmente come consumatori significativi agli occhi degli imprenditori bianchi alla ricerca di nuove opportunità di mercato. È stato quindi creato un intero settore di radio* black-oriented *per attirare il pubblico afroamericano con quella che veniva identificata come la loro musica (blues, rhythm'n'blues, gospel, ecc.). Tuttavia, queste strategie economiche alimentarono un'opportunità per i disc-jockey afroamericani, che sfruttarono la loro posizione di mediatori nei confronti del mercato per riorientare lo scopo delle radio* black-appeal *dalla finalità meramente economica all'organizzazione della comunità.*

In August 1967, Martin Luther King gave a speech at the National Association of Television and Radio Announcers (NATRA) annual convention. This organization gathered African American disc-jockeys and industry executives producing black-identified music to sort out the future of black-oriented radio[1]. In the midst of the long, hot summer of 1967, riddled with race riots, the civil rights leader acknowledged the importance of the media and its agents:

> I value this special opportunity to address you this evening for in my years of struggle, both north and south, I have come to appreciate the role which the radio announcer plays in the life of our people. For better or for worse, you are opinion-makers in the community and it is important that you remain aware of the power which is potential in your vocation[2].

[1] Radio aiming at the African American audience. The term refers only to the intended audience and not the racial identification of its staff or owners.
[2] KING, Martin Luther, “Transforming a Neighborhood”, unpublished version of a speech at the NATRA Convention, RCA Dinner, Atlanta, Georgia (11 August 1967), King Center Library and Archives, 7-8.

Indeed, at that point in history, black-oriented radio had come to epitomize the black community in many cities. This institution embraced several aspects of African American life, ranging from religious services broadcasted live to educational programs, small concerts for teenagers, local businesses advertising and hourly local news. Black-appeal radio had meant first the radio where you could hear «black music» (blues, jazz, spirituals, rhythm'n'blues, etc.). By the 1960s, it meant the media that embodied the African American daily experience. Around that time, that experience was highly political, and the famous civil rights leader was more than aware of the role black-oriented radio could play in the struggle.

In his speech, Dr. King emphasized the direct implications of a few disc-jockeys (DJs) in the civil rights movement, using their talent to raise funds for associations such as the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) or the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference)[3]. Nonetheless, he also underlined the «powerful cultural bridge between Black and White»[4] that the broadcast of black music made possible. He considered desegregation easier since all youth were listening to the same music, characterizing this evolution as a «cultural conquest that surpasses even Alexander the Great»[5]. The Nobel Prize winner understood that the much-mediated civil rights campaigns of his time were but one side of the medal, in the struggle for equality. A more hidden fight was operating on the cultural ground, and disc-jockeys were at its battlefront.

Historical research has acknowledged the role of black-oriented radio during the civil rights movement[6]. It has also extensively written about the success of black-identified genres around that same time, analyzing how emancipatory politics materialized in musical taste[7]. However, both historiographies have focused on individual political involvement from particular DJs and musicians or producers, for a long time neglecting how the economic structures and common workers crossed this period and its stakes. It has also often ignored how music could reproduce social inequality and racial discrimination[8]. More recently, the socio-economic frame behind the civil rights movement and the way local citizens, rather than large national organizations, have

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[3] The first had spearheaded legal desegregation in the 1950s while the second was Dr. King's organization.
[4] *Ibidem*.
[5] *Ibidem*.
[6] SEARCY, Jennifer, *The Voice of the Negro: African American Radio, WVON, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Chicago*, Chicago, Loyola University Chicago, 2012; BAPTISTE, Bala James, *Race and Radio: Pioneering Black Broadcasters in New Orleans*, Jackson, Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2019; WARD, Brian, *Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2006; MILLS, Zachary William, *Talking Drum: Chicago's WVON Radio and the Sonorous Image of Black Lives, 1963-1983*, Chicago, Northwestern University, 2017.
[7] See for instance: GURALNICK, Peter Guralnick, *Sweet soul music: rhythm and blues and the southern dream of freedom*, New York, Harper & Row, 1986; WARD, Brian, *Just my soul responding: rhythm and blues, black consciousness and race relations*, London, UCL press, 1998.
[8] HUGHES, Charles L., *Country soul: making music and making race in the American South*, Chapel Hill (NC), University of North Carolina press, 2015; DELMONT, Matthew F., *The Nicest Kids in Town: American Bandstand, Rock 'n' Roll, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in 1950s Philadelphia*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012.

appropriated the politics of the 1960s to improve their living conditions have been investigated[9]. The history of black-appeal radio gives us the opportunity to embrace these new perspectives all at once. It allows us to see how black music was used in different strategies to attract the African American consumer, either to exploit or to emancipate. Born from a capitalistic desire by white entrepreneurs to benefit from African Americans' newfound prosperity, black-oriented radio was then turned by its users into a potential tool for political action, both local and national. However, the path from exploitation to emancipation is not straightforward and African Americans experienced the euphoria and desillusions that characterized the civil rights era. In this article, I wish to revisit the history of black-appeal radio by inserting it into the history of mass consumption[10] and the socio-economic dimensions of the 1950s and 1960s political activity. I argue that doing so helps us understand why music has no inherent power regarding political action. Because it is a product of consumption, it is subordinate to its ambiguous nature: it can both emancipate and alienate according to the purpose of whoever wields it. Based on archival material crossing the viewpoints of managers and employees, my aim is to give another perspective on postwar politics in the United States by looking at the social consequences of black music's success through labor history. I will use the proceedings of the National Association of Broadcasters' (NAB) conventions[11], an annual gathering of owners and managers of radios; along with oral histories of disc-jockeys and radio personnel[12]; and the trade press relating to music and broadcasting («Billboard», «Cash Box», «Broadcasting» and «Sponsor»). I will first explain how African Americans became a valuable market for entrepreneurs, bringing about the birth of black-appeal radio. Then, I will show how black DJs used their strategic position to claim better working conditions and turn radio from money-making to community-organizing. Finally, I will identify the limits of this strategy based first and foremost on consumption.

1. African Americans and consumer culture

The Great Migration lies at the cornerstone of many discussions over race and consumer culture. From the First World War on, the US saw the moving of millions of blacks, once concentrated in the rural South, to the cities, especially in the North, Midwest and West.

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[9] HOLT, Thomas C., *The Movement: The African American Struggle for Civil Rights*, New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2021; LEVENSTEIN, Lisa, *A Movement Without Marches: African American Women and the Politics of Poverty in Postwar Philadelphia*, Chapel Hill (NC), The University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

[10] COHEN, Lizabeth, «The Mass in Mass Consumption», in *Reviews in American History*, 1990, 18, 4/1990, pp. 548-555; ID., *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, New York (NY), Vintage, 2003.

[11] National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) records, 0017-MMC. Special Collections and University Archives, University of Maryland.

[12] Black Radio: Telling It Like It Was, SC 39, Archives of African American Music and Culture, Indiana University, Bloomington.

Prompted by the slowing down of European immigration, the mobilization of white workers to war and the following need of manpower in industrial labor, the Great Migration opened a window within the black horizon. Running away from tremendous racial domination on the plantations, African Americans found better-paying jobs and reduced dependence on white employers, thanks to competition and labor law, whereas sharecropping tied the farmer to the land and its owner. While 77% of African Americans were rural in 1900, that number was down to 51% in 1940[13].

As many historians have already established, this historical phenomenon was a fundamental deal-changer in African American history. The rural black experience in the South was often synonymous with racial oppression at every level: work, housing, education, transport, shopping, groceries, etc. Blacks were usually at the mercy of white employers, landlords, shopkeepers, who regularly used every opportunity to remind them that the balance of power leaned in their favor[14]. The move to the city, even in the South, meant access to either (a few) black-owned enterprises or to chains, franchises and more standardized services that could ease their experience as customers. Combined with higher income, these new conditions made possible the access of huge cohorts of African Americans into the consumer society[15]. However, the market was not quite ready for African Americans to consume as their white fellow citizens. In a general sense, the mostly white-owned commerce was disregarding African American neighborhoods and the African American market. One of the Great Migration's main consequences was the formation of black ghettos in northern cities as separated communities with a paralleled model of development[16]. This meant that black ghettos were persistently under-supplied: supermarkets and chains were usually less present. White companies were just not interested in populations they assumed were poor, leaving the black neighborhoods with only convenience stores[17]. On the other side, because of mass spread racism, blacks were less eager to invest in entrepreneurship. Black-owned ventures were therefore pretty rare. When they could afford it, African Americans who lived far away from large stores accessed the vast wonders of consuming society through

[13] TROTTER, Joe William, *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1991; *The Social and Economic Status of the Black Population in the United States: An Historical View, 1790 1978*, Washington D.C., U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980, 15

[14] BERREY, Stephen A., *The Jim Crow Routine: Everyday Performances of Race, Civil Rights, and Segregation in Mississippi*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2015.

[15] COHEN, Lizabeth, *Rebellion: Forcing Open the Doors of Public Accommodations*, in ID., *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, New York, Vintage Books, 2003, pp. 166-192.

[16] WACQUANT, Loïc, «De la "terre promise" au ghetto, la grande migration noire américaine, 1916-1930», in KEKEH-DIKA, Andrée-Anne, LE DANTEC-LOWRY, Hélène, *Formes et écritures du départ: incursions dans les Amériques noires*, Paris, L'Harmattan, pp. 25-41.

[17] BAY, Mia, FABIAN, Ann (edited by), *Race and Retail: Consumption across the Color Line*, Rutgers University Press., New Brunswick (NJ), Rutgers University Press, 2015.

mail-ordering[18]. In other words, African American consumers were not taken seriously as a market[19].

However, a few sectors eventually realized they could make money with the African American market. The very first of these companies emanated from the music industry. In 1920, OKeh Records famously discovered the scope of an African American market with the tremendous sales it made out of Mamie Smith's *Crazy Blues*[20]. From then on, several minor labels and most of the majors developed a «black division» within their catalog. Important white-owned corporations developing a stabilized interest in this racially defined market was unheard of at that time. Nevertheless, it was the inauguration of what would turn out to be a long-lived tradition.

Thus, the music industry pioneered the white interest in African American consumption, and it is no accident. This situation was made possible by the increased racialisation of music that was taking place at that time. According to historian Karl H. Miller and others, the more the segregation was strengthened, the more the music was racialized[21]. African Americans were increasingly defined by their music, which was explained as «wild», «hot» or «ecstatic»[22]. Building upon the first steps of the Great Migration, this trend would only grow in the following years. Since the construction of black music was in part forged within the context of segregation, we could see a transition from one system of racial domination to another. First, the demeaning racialisation of black music was meant to exclude African Americans, through their distinctive culture, from what was defined as a (white) American culture. Second, that very same distinctive black culture was used to exploit African American consumption. Music was manufactured as an agent of racial domination, although it would serve the opposite purpose later.

Soon after the successes of black music records, major corporations displayed an interest in the African American market. Kellogg's organized a major campaign in the mid-1930s, targeting African Americans based on socio-demographic data suggesting an important spending power. Their campaign achieved great success with those they defined as « attention-starved ». The idea was to display some interest in black consumption habits for African Americans to feel valued and thus loyal to the brand. The oil company Esso also initiated a black division, innovating by hiring a black specialist. James A. «Billboard» Jackson, formally a press reporter for black entertainment

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[18] HALE, Grace Elizabeth, *"For Colored" and "For White": Segregating Consumption in the South*, in DAILEY, Jane, GILMORE, Glenda E., SIMON, Bryant (ed. by), *.Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights*, Princeton (NJ), Princeton University Press, 2000, pp. 162-182.
[19] WEEMS, Robert E., *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century*, New York, NYU Press, 1998.
[20] SOUTHERN, Eileen, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, New York, W. W. Norton, 1971.
[21] MILLER, Karl H., *Segregating sound: inventing folk and pop music in the age of Jim Crow*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010; MARTIN, Denis-Constant, «Gregory Walker et le singe roublard. La question de la création devant l'inexistence et la réalité de l'idée de "musique noire"», in *Volume!. La revue des musiques populaires*, 8, 1/2011, pp. 17-39.
[22] RADANO, Ronald M., *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music*, Chicago, University of Chicago press, 2003, pp. 103, 234.

in New York, was entrusted by Esso to convince black communities to favor their oil. He would be the first of a long row of « racial experts »[23]. For a time, these minimal steps would suffice, until increased politicization among African Americans demanded another level of effort. Indeed, that new interest did mean an improvement, because once considered as customers, there was a way for African Americans to be genuinely valued. It was not simple and natural, but through the strategic use of their spending power, they could have their considerations heard.

2. Radio gets involved

Prior to World War II, African Americans had already started to use their spending power as a tool for social justice. However, the emphasis was on jobs. In the early 1930s, several black organizations and newspapers famously launched a campaign called «Don't Shop Where You Can't Work» to boycott shops – especially department stores – that wouldn't hire African Americans. In Chicago and Harlem, these campaigns were highly successful. However, after the war, the aim shifted to the wish to wield a fuller citizenship. These activists claimed the same price-quality ratio that the rest of the (white) nation enjoyed. Therefore, a decade before the mid-1950s, traditionally considered the start of the civil rights movement, several local campaigns were launched to demand equal access to public accommodations throughout the country[24]. The radio industry would soon know how to tap right into the middle of that desire.

The broadcasters had been thriving for two decades. Starting in the mid-1920s, it had managed to clear the government out of its market. Unlike most other countries, American radio lacked a public broadcaster and was mostly devoted to commercial purposes. Money was made through advertisers and sponsors, whose dollars would finance everything in the radio. The market came to be quickly dominated by major networks (CBS, NBC, ABC) that provided shows for thousands of affiliated stations throughout the country. Local independent radios existed but relied on local advertising from minor companies. The amount of money they could gather from these advertisers was much more limited than the networks. Therefore, the quantity and quality of shows were disproportionately in favor of networks that could afford the best actors and entertainers for their national audience. For instance, music was provided by orchestras which would play the best-selling music of that time live in the studio. Musical genres associated with minorities, such as black music, were therefore much less likely to be heard over the airwaves. All networks targeted a national, unsegmented audience, trying to get the most out of this big pie[25]. Everything changed in the 1940s because of one single invention: television.

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[23] WEEMS, Robert E., *Desegregating the Dollar*, cit.
[24] COHEN, Lizabeth, *Rebellion: Forcing Open the Doors of Public Accommodations*, cit.
[25] BARNOUW Erik, *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States*, vol. 2, *1933 to 1953*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1968.

Historians have long been aware of the consequences from this technological breakthrough. By the late 1940s it had become clear that television would be favored by the audiences as soon as they could afford it. This promising market was consequently targeted by the networks which started to shift their investments from the radio market to the television market. Gradually, the quality and attractiveness of network radio shows would decrease, along with their market shares. This movement left some room for independent radios to grow. These stations could not afford orchestras, nor actors, so they came up with a new and cheap way to fill the air: a music show based on records played by a single announcer. This individual came to be known as the « disc-jockey » (DJ). In the late 1940s, this format - DJ-oriented - was quickly understood as a lifeline for broadcasters.

Indeed, listening to the annual convention proceedings of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), one can easily notice the profound distress that characterized radio owners in the face of television[26]. These entrepreneurs perceived themselves as the horse industry ruined by the arrival of railways. The success encountered by the DJ format enabled them to escape their doom, or so they felt. Bill Adams, program manager at WHEC (Rochester, NY) summed up the situation with a critical tone in 1947: «Everybody has at least one disc jockey; some stations have half a dozen, and some program managers are of the opinion that this type of show is the answer to everything»[27]. However, competition became fierce between the independents who battled for the same local market, usually a city. They could not all target the same general audience. Therefore, a segmentation of the market took place where every radio tried to specialize in one particular socio-demographic sector[28]. Divided by class, age, geography (urban or rural) and also race. Indeed, while black-oriented programs were but a handful in the USA during the 1940s, their number rose dramatically starting in the late 1940s. Watching from the perspective of white, wealthy broadcasters anxious about TV helps us understand how that came about. Members of the NAB, while they completely ignored the African American market for over two decades, suddenly took an interest in the black population around that time. Several reports showed that African Americans had a spending power far superior to what was commonly held true so far. More importantly, black homes were equipped with radio, whereas they were far behind in terms of TV sets. For a short period, African Americans thus represented a captive market for radio owners eager to find a socio-demographic niche decent enough to attract advertisers. Therefore, it was not a wish to better serve the black population that created a long-lived and stable black-

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[26] See for instance Harold Essex' speech at the 29th Annual Convention: Proceedings of Labor Relations Session April 15-19, 1951, Box 6 folder 13, N.A.B. Records, University of Maryland, p.37-39.

[27] Bill Summers at the 25th Annual Convention: Proceedings of the Program Clinic, September 15-18, 1947, Box 4 folder 2, N.A.B. Records, University of Maryland, p. 147.

[28] RUSSO, Alexander, *Radio in the Television Era: 1950s-2000s*, in BODROGHKOZY, Aniko (ed. by), *A Companion to the History of American Broadcasting*, Hoboken (NJ), Wiley-Blackwell, 2018, pp. 135-152.

appeal radio field, but broadcasters' desire to remain profitable while getting through the «TV crisis».

3. When segregation rhymes with remuneration

Yet, this path was still uncommon and needed some spotlight. In 1949, the trade magazine for advertisers «Sponsor» edited the first of a long series of « Negro Market » articles called «The Forgotten 15.000.000. 10 billion a year Negro market is largely ignored by national advertisers»[29]. Building upon a survey made in 1946 by the Research Company of America[30], the findings were meant to be both surprising and extremely interesting for business. Published in the magazine designed for buyers of broadcast advertising, it was a bridge between the knowledge of an emerging market and the medium best suited to collect its benefits. It revealed that black homes were equipped with radio (from 85% to 95% depending on the location[31]) and that, although they were discriminated against in society, «there are nevertheless no such things as 'segregated ears'»[32]. The article depicted African Americans as « attention-starved » consumers [sic] with their pockets full and a keen desire to spend it on quality products which they were denied for so long. This trade publication, aimed at helping mostly white entrepreneurs get wealthier, presented African Americans as a passive and monolithic population. On the contrary, there was a diverse set of social groups within black communities in the country, and the southern ones were still under-capitalized. Yet, in order to attract advertisers who were outside these communities, it depicted an over-simplified picture of the black audience, along with a distorted vision of its alleged behavior. It emphasized their loyalty, in a way that differed very little from the old plantation stereotype of the faithful and loyal slave[33].

The idea of segregation producing an injured ego among African Americans was at the center of the argument for their salvability as a valuable consumer group. Because they were excluded from leisure opportunities, they spent more on manufactured goods and food; because they were depreciated in society, they wanted to spend more to prove their value in a pathology that was defined as «insecurity neurosis»; because they suffered from unequal education, they read less and relied therefore more on radio than newspapers, etc. Finally, all the broadcasters had to do was to supply black music – understood as any music made by an African American – whereas the surveys showed an interest by African Americans for many genres (especially pop, religious music

[29] «The Forgotten 15,000,000. 10 Billion a Year Negro Market is Largely Ignored by National Advertisers », in *Sponsor*, 10 October 1949, pp. 24-27.
[30] STEELE Edgar A., «Some Aspects of the Negro Market», in *Journal of Marketing*, 11, 4/1947, pp. 399-401.
[31] Only the "East South Central" (Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama) went as low as 70%.
[32] « The Forgotten 15,000,000 », cit., p. 25.
[33] KERN-FOXWORTH, Marilyn, *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, Westport, Connecticut, Praeger, 1994.

and classical). A racialized music, and the DJs playing it, was the key to unlock a market they perceived as distant from themselves. But it also enclosed the black population within cultural confines defined solely by race.

Nevertheless, a part of the radio industry had found its audience, as well as its advertisers, also eager to sell to African Americans. We can take a closer look at one particular broadcaster. The OK Group was a consortium of southern radios in the 1950s and 1960s that eventually constituted one of the major groups of black-appeal radios in the South. Its two owners, Jules J. Paglin and Stanley W. Ray, Jr., were white broadcasters looking for a profitable enterprise. Settling for the African American market, they needed to convince their white fellow citizens in the segregated South that making money with the African American purchases was worth trying. They invited advertisers to jump on this «untouched, profitable consumer group»[34]. Like many of their peers, to persuade advertisers, they used a «scientific» approach. Building upon the work of a few African American sociologists of that time[35], they isolated racial discrimination and inequity to underline what they presented as typically black pathologies that conveniently matched their needs. African Americans were detailed as «matriarchal» and prone to compulsive buying habits. In the case of the OK Group, they associated with a black sociologist, Henry A. Bullock, from Texas Southern University in Houston where they had a radio outlet (KYOK). The data from this research was caricatured in order to formulate such statements as:

> Among the findings: dominance of the Negro mother in the home; in personality development, Negro males emerge submissive, females aggressive; Negro income is more discretionary, with necessity purchases not so fixed as for whites; Negroes must identify themselves with the situation in advertisements; they are more optimistic of the future than whites[36].

All these « findings » are arguments for the advertiser to choose a more intensive marketing campaign that would mostly benefit the radio owners while perpetuating stereotyped and demeaning visions of African Americans. Most of all, it deprived the African American public of the ability to voice its own depiction.

It was also a very gendered version of racial caricature. The legacy of this intersection between segregation and the racialization of music can also be found in the place devoted to women in

[34] «OK Group covers the Gold Coast in the Gulf Coast», in *Broadcasting*, 3 October 1955, p. 21.

[35] FRAZIER, Franklin E., *The Negro Family in the United States*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1939. This African American fundamental sociologist and civil rights advocate has produced a meticulous work linking African American family structure with socio-economic frame, stressing the devastating effects of black male unemployment in the community. The distortions of this kind of scholarship are explored in: GEARY, Daniel, *Beyond Civil Rights: The Moynihan Report and Its Legacy*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.

[36] *Broadcasting*, 16 March 1959, p. 144.

that field, in two ways. On the one hand, the female audience was seen as central because black homes were understood as matriarchal. Since African American women were supposed to be the ones spending the money, they should be targeted. Special programs were thus designed for them, around homemaking issues and religious music. It reproduced an approach that was well established in the mainstream market targeting white women. To make it easier for black women to identify with the product, stations hired African American female DJs to broadcast religious (spirituals, gospel) and romantic songs (pop or soft rhythm 'n' blues). However, on several occasions they refused to be restricted to that corner. During the 1950s, many black female DJs claimed with success the right to broadcast to everyone, with every kind of rhythm 'n' blues. Just as the blueswomen studied by Angela Davis, they were proactive in their own emancipation[37]. On the other hand, while white males could be DJs of black music, it was unthinkable to find a white female disc-jockey of black music. They could broadcast pop, country, religious music, etc., but there seems to have been a taboo about black-identified genres. Considering that the racialization of music is rooted in the experience of segregation, it is not surprising. Historians have underlined the centrality of white women's sexuality in segregationists' thinking[38]. Hence, gender hierarchies were inextricably linked to the construction of racial authenticity within black music and its diffusion.

Nevertheless, like the OK Group, many followed *Sponsor*'s advice and invested in black-appeal radio. Within a few years, every city with a sizable black population would see the birth of a radio to target them. In big cities, it was usually two, three, or more black-appeal outlets targeting the same population)[39]. Rural areas were also concerned and small towns usually enjoyed at least one show targeting African Americans, when there was a sizable population. Although it was a lucrative opportunity, not all radios chose that path. For instance, WDXI in Madison county, Tennessee, with 34% of its population black[40], did not have a single minute of black-oriented programming. On the contrary, its promotional booklet exposed blackface characters supporting a white-focused radio identity. However, most of the black communities were covered by some sort of programming. But if the original aim was indeed African Americans, this surge in black-oriented radio exposed black music to the rest of the country. Eventually, black-appeal radios were not only beaming to black audiences but also white ones, especially the youth. Music historians have analyzed this phenomenon as a crucial part in the emergence of new genres,

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[37] DAVIS, Angela, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude «Ma» Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1998.
[38] FERBER, Abby L., «Constructing whiteness: the intersections of race and gender in US white supremacist discourse», in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 21, 1/1998, pp. 48-63.
[39] «The Forgotten 15,000,000 - Three Years Later », in *Sponsor*, 25 July 1952, pp. 29-30, 72, 76.
[40] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *U.S. CEnsus of Population: 1960. Supplementary Reports, Series PC(S1)-52*, "Negro Population, by County: 1960 and 1950", U.S. Governement Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1966, p. 52.

especially rock’n’roll[41]. This increased the scope of the black music industry, boosting its sales and placing black-oriented radios at the corner of an important stream of money. The problem was then who would grasp that flow.

The record companies affiliated with black music (Atlantic, Motown, Stax, etc.) were making a lot of profits. Berry Gordy, Jr., Motown’s founder, quickly became one of the richest African Americans in the country. A few musicians were also enjoying financial success, especially the likes of Ray Charles, James Brown, etc[42]. But the people disseminating the music were not left behind. Understanding that their sales depended widely on radio airplay, the labels took special care of disc jockeys to make sure they would play their records. Their representatives would make gifts to DJs, offering free records at the minimum, but also cars, furs for their wife, and sometimes a regular sum of money. The practice predated the 1950s by large[43]. It was born at the turn of the last century (along with copyright laws and royalties) and initially concerned music publishers who would give money to singers and bandleaders to play their music. When the DJ show began to dominate the music business, labels started to target DJs to make sure their music would sell. The practice was coined *payola* in the 1940s. Since the usual income of disc-jockeys was pretty low, they enthusiastically received this attention. Apart from the financial aspect, these sollicitations helped the profession realize how central it was to the music industry. They literally could « break a record » (i.e, making it a hit) with their playlists and their comments, provided that they were popular enough themselves. Not all DJs could enjoy that flow of money, they were divided by fame, but also by sex. Women seem to have been largely excluded from the practice of payola[44].

This inequity was also supported by another historical phenomenon that singled out individual DJs in particular: the tremendous expansion of youth culture[45]. Following the prosperity in the postwar United-States, teenagers grasped a part of that wealth from their parents to buy their own records. It stimulated certain genres such as rock’n’roll. But the fandom was not reduced to musicians and DJs enjoyed widespread manias throughout the 1950s[46]. Most of the national exposure went to white « platter-spinners », such as Alan Freed in New York and Dick Clark in Philadelphia with his TV show *American Bandstand*. The most successful DJs were able to build fortunes upon their strategic position. A large part of payola consisted in putting a DJ’s name in a

[41] WARD, Brian, *Just my soul responding: rhythm and blues, black consciousness and race relations*, London, UCL press, 1998, p.30.
[42] *Ibidem*, pp. 252-258.
[43] SEGRAVE, Kerry, *Payola in the Music Industry: A History, 1880-1991*, Jefferson (NC), McFarland & Co Inc, 1994.
[44] See for instance Martha Jean Steinberg interview by Jacquie Gales-Webb, 06/13/1995, SC 39: Black Radio Collection, series 2-3, AAAMC. In payola investigations, there were no women found in the label’s archives used as evidence during the prosecutions.
[45] HEILBRONNER, Oded, «From a Culture for Youth to a Culture of Youth: Recent Trends in the Historiography of Western Youth Cultures», in *Contemporary European History*, 17, 4/2008, pp. 575-591.
[46] SMITH, Wes, *The Pied Pipers of Rock «N» Roll: Radio Deejays of the 50s and 60s*, Marietta, Ga, Longstreet Press, Inc., 1989.

song's credits, to link the song's fate to DJs' hope of royalties. The more you promoted a song, the more money you would get in the end. This practice, far from paralyzing the music industry under the same dominant labels, gave an opportunity for small labels to get their music out and gain exposure that they could never have had otherwise[47].

Everyone seemed to enjoy that situation, apart from one actor: the traditional music industry, and especially the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP). This music publishing company had enjoyed a quasi-monopoly on all music, until they started to demand higher fees for radio airplay of their licensed music. Broadcasters, irritated by this move, joined forces to create a competitor: Broadcast Music, Inc (BMI). Left with all the marginal musicians that ASCAP refused to admit among its ranks, BMI's catalog embraced under-developed genres such as *hillbilly music*, *rhythm'n'blues*, *latin music*, etc. It was among that breeding ground that rock'n'roll would emerge in the 1950s, bringing unexpected prosperity to BMI and infuriating ASCAP. To undermine its foe, the company tried many strategies to associate rock'n'roll with immoral behavior, sex, riots, racial mixing, etc. Eventually, it encountered some success by linking rock'n'roll with payola during a major moral panic that took place at the end of 1959[48].

The episode known as the payola scandal was centered on the congressional investigation over the practice that was defined as corruption. Congressmen presented themselves as moral crusaders defending the good citizens against bad music that was forced into their ears by corrupted disc-jockeys. The investigation was largely a set up, with just a few DJs being caught up and sued by some zealous prosecutors, but most of them got away. Payola survived this turning point but it had to be more discrete[49]. However, DJs gradually lost their power over programming. Radio management, in order to convince the public that their outlet was clean off payola, displayed a new method by relying on playlists rather than DJs' choices. The playlists were made by Program Directors and managers who became the relevant level to « corrupt » for labels. This format, called Top 40 because they claimed to play the forty most-wanted songs, was the start of the DJ's decline. Most notably, the control from management over the staff, and especially DJs, tightened. Guidebooks for managers show a complete shift in the vision of announcers, requiring less personality, more standardized practices[50]. The technological evolution also permitted to pre-record commercials and shows while it used to be made live by DJs. One single DJ could record a commercial or a show for hundreds of outlets. This took away the ability of a local DJ to be a cornerstone for advertisers, while the payola scandal's fallout complicated their relations with

[47] ENNIS, Philip H., *The Seventh Stream: The Emergence of Rock 'n' roll in American Popular Music*, Middletown (CT), Wesleyan University Press, 1992.
[48] MARTIN, Linda, SEGRAVE, Kerry, *Anti-Rock: The Opposition To Rock'n' Roll.*, New York, Da Capo Press, 1993.
[49] BREWSTER Bill, BROUGHTON Frank, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey*, London, Headline, 1999.
[50] RANDAL Ted, «Ted Randal Enterprises Programming Book», Southern Folklife Collection Radio and Television Files, 1930-2005, folder 83, University of North Carolina.

labels. By the early 1960s, the trend was unveiling itself to disc jockeys who gradually realized their golden age was behind.

Every DJ was impacted, but blacks even more because they were far behind in terms of salaries. Without widespread payola, the money stream tightened. By no means payola stopped. But it became harder and harder to easily enjoy it. While most DJs tried to turn back to it after the congressional investigation had passed, they found themselves under the scrutiny of another institution: the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Under pressure from Congress the agency launched a series of investigations looking for payola practices over several years. It unfolded in 1964. Although this time the investigations and prosecutions were conducted in secret, the DJ’s position was not safe anymore[51]. Black disc-jockeys were not particularly targeted during the first waves of investigations. Yet, since rock ‘n’ roll was at the center of the moral panic constructed by the Congress, DJs of black-identified genres could expect investigations sooner or later. Some started to realize that their financial security and working conditions should be defended in another way. Incidentally, that evolution took place in the middle of the 1960s, when political involvement, especially the civil rights movement, was booming. Part of the African American disc-jockeys thus sought an alliance with the movement to improve their working status. One national organization in particular was central to that dynamic.

4. Disc jockeys get organized

Part of the need for political action went through specific organizations. Disc-jockeys had an union, called the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA). However, the union was born in the 1930s when African Americans were mostly excluded from the radio industry. While the 1940s & 1950s saw AFTRA achieving a status of power within industrial relations, it was largely without black disc jockeys. Because it did not pay attention to black workers at that time, an alternate organization emerged from them in 1955: NATRA (National Association of Television & Radio Announcers). At the beginning, it focused on improving the fate of black DJs mostly by relying on payola. The organization had strong ties with black music labels and it enjoyed a stable flow of money for its members. The 1959 payola scandal seems to have changed little over that matter and labels were still special guests in NATRA’s conventions during the early 1960s. However, there was an ideological shift from some of its members.

In 1964, a young generation of highly politicized disc-jockeys called the « new breed » took over NATRA. One of their leaders, Charles Johnsons, explained that among 60 000 people employed in radio, only 600 were black, and of the 550 commercial radios aiming at the black

[51] « New F.C.C. Inquiry On “Payola” Is Set; Commission Cites Reports of Widespread Payments in Broadcasting industry », in *The New York Times*, 28 November 1964.

audience, just 5 were black-owned. In short, while African Americans represented more than 10% of the population, they controlled only 1% of the broadcasting industry, even within the part that focused on them. Above all, their income was smaller than that of their white colleagues. They intended to rely on the newly voted 1964 Civil Rights Act to demand fair employment practices. NATRA also incited its members to support black registration to vote in order to get Lyndon Johnson re-elected and make sure they had an ally within the government[52].

Interestingly, while the 1950s saw the black DJs as a gateway to the African American market, the 1960s turned them into gateways to the black community and therefore, some sort of anti-riots insurance. During the race riots that riddled the late 1960s, NATRA managed to present itself and its black DJs as peace-keepers, able to calm the people down and stop a riot. There were indeed cases where local popular DJs intervened in the streets to stop a situation from escalating, and most of them issued statements on the air urging people to « stay home ». NATRA then used this position to strike a deal with vice-president Hubert Humphrey to get a seat at the President's Council on Youth Opportunity[53]. This advisory council was meant to oversee the government’s efforts in regulating and helping the country’s youth, especially to avoid riots. The association sought to capitalize on the hope for peace to improve the position of its DJs.

During the mid-1960s, the organization had set up an agenda calling for « increasing black ownership of broadcast outlets, formation of a black-focused radio news service, increasing black employment in the broadcast industry (especially at the management level), and establishing a professional college of broadcasting to train African Americans for jobs in the industry»[54]. This way, it hoped to make permanent the politicization of the 1960s through formation and ownership. In 1967, it welcomed Martin Luther King and SNCC's H. Rap Brown for speeches at their convention. NATRA received the full support of the industry executives producing black music that had been companions for many years. Nonetheless, this dynamic was cut short in 1968, when several members of NATRA’s leadership and its music industry friends got threatened by unidentified thugs. The association collided with a more radical one, called the Fair Play Committee (FPC). Born in Harlem in the mid-1960s, strongly associated with the Black Power ideology, this militant group specialized in putting pressure on, and sometimes threatening, white people involved in black-appeal radio and black music. They also turned against those they called «uncle toms», meaning African American not militant enough and deemed submitted to the white establishment. They demanded more black ownership and black management, an increased attention to news and public affairs relating to the community and an emphasis on black-owned business advertising instead of white-owned. They also turned against white-owned records

[52] BARLOW, William, *Voice Over*, *op. cit.*, p. 222.
[53] «A Statement From E. Rodney Jones and Del Shields of NATRA», in *Broadcasting*, 16 September 1968, p. 69.
[54] BARLOW, William, *Voice Over*, cit., p. 223.

companies like Stax and Atlantic, which did not let small black-owned labels exist in their view. Finally, they blamed black DJs still receiving payola: «Exposing those officers and members who are using their positions to get rich while their brothers starve»[55]. Historians usually consider this moment as a turning point in African American activism in radio. The collision between the two organizations is interpreted as a mutual annihilation. The ideological split, typical of the late 1960s African American activism, is held responsible for the decline of DJ organizing in the 1970s. Indeed, NATRA stopped involving itself with working conflicts among DJs and it decreased its collaboration with civil rights associations. But rather than disappearing, NATRA re-centered itself towards lobbying. It also managed to absorb FPC's critique by incorporating its leadership into its network. Dino Woodward, a FPC leader in 1968, was thus hired as a promotion man for Stax rewarded five years later by NATRA itself as «best promotion man of the year»[56]. In the end, NATRA's and FPC's demands were very similar, they diverged mainly over the methods.

Regardless of the confusion surrounding the political orientation of NATRA, many stations started to offer editorials and programs centered around black activism. Some radios decided to organize their playlists according to the black freedom struggle and relied heavily on militant songs, such as *Say It Loud, I'm Black And I'm Proud* by James Brown, or *What's Going On* by Marvin Gaye. A more common evolution was to instore regular programs to explore African American history, or great black leaders and thinkers. For instance, KGFJ-AM in Los Angeles broadcasted *Dr. Martin Luther King Speaks*, presented the late leader's philosophy and talked about its legacy. Most of these programs were short (a few minutes every day), but a few were more sophisticated, such as Oakland outlet KDIA's *Black Montage*, a platform to express the diversity of opinions among African American activists. This trend developed equally in black-owned and white-owned outlets. KDIA belonged to the Sonderling group of black-oriented stations led by German-American white entrepreneur Egmont Sonderling. Most black-appeal radios followed that path as long as it was good for business. Militant programming, be it speeches, talks or songs, was encouraged because during that time it meant more profits. Black-oriented radio had never been so militant and yet, according to a national sales representative at NATRA's 1970 convention: «black radio [was] in the best shape economically that it [had] ever been»[57]. Also, it seems to have been easier to conduct more militant programming in the North, Midwest and West, especially in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, than in the South. Civil rights association, such as the CORE or the Urban League, rewarded northern stations for their political programming on several occasions, while it is harder to fin mentions of southern actions. Ironically, since these radios were mostly white-owned, white people tended to receive these rewards more often.

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[55] «A swing to Negro activism», in *Broadcasting*, 26 August 1968, pp. 30-34.
[56] «Elections highlights NATRA '73», in *Record World*, 25 August 1973, p. 9.
[57] FAMIGHETTI Rocco, « Black radio: on a high wire with no net », in *Broadcasting*, 8 August 1970, p. 44.

Yet, there was a tension between political content over the airwaves and financial stability. As long as the balance between the two was satisfying to the owners, activism was tolerated, or even encouraged. Obviously, this movement was limited, and repeated claims, throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, at NATRA conventions, that black-oriented radio should be «more than soul music», indicates that there was still progress to be made[58]. Interestingly, while music had been a decisive tool to achieve the recognition that black-oriented radio now enjoyed, it also appeared to NATRA leaders as its limitation. In their opinion, activism required to go beyond musical programming, which was understood as a capitalist product first and foremost, tying the DJ's political efforts within commercial dynamics rather than revolutionary practices. At the same time, deprived of it, the DJ meant nothing. The tension regarding this balance was instrumental in deciding the fate of «black radio». Nonetheless, whatever the degree, political programming was possible. But this relative leniency should not be deceiving: DJs' working conditions were still deplorable and broadcasters were not willing to change that.

5. Weaponizing consumption

Disc-jockeys thus turned to civil rights activism, not only to promote it, but to rely on it for their own struggle. Radio has been associated with the civil rights movement by looking at particular DJs. Georgie Woods in Philadelphia (WDAS) is famous for befriending Martin Luther King and raising a lot of money for the SCLC. Brian E. Ward has written an entire book about the links between the movement and radio[59]. Nonetheless, looking at the history of common black-targeted radios, the civil rights movement expressed itself in a much more practical way. Apart from NATRA, black disc jockeys started to redirect the purpose of black-appeal radio from money-making to community-organizing on a much more local level.

The involvement in the community had long been a standard in radio in general and in black-oriented radio in particular. Mostly, stations would organize charity events and sponsor fund-raising events for scholarships, baseball teams, local hospitals, etc. For white-owned black-appeal radios, it was a convenient way to ensure a good image and avoid being labeled as exploiters. The OK Group was cautious about that and thus sponsored many events and attracted the support of local associations. For instance, in Houston, its outlet KYOK prided itself by receiving awards from the local boy scouts, the student body of a university, and sponsoring rodeos and Easter sunrise services. They also held beauty pageants, talent contests, and proms. The radio made flyers out of these events with pictures of their DJs involved. But it never showed the white management, nor the white owners. Also, the overall involvement was quite superficial. It did not cost them very

[58] See for example Delores Tuckers' speech reported in «NATRA turns up volume in demands for black rights », *Broadcasting*, 28 August 1972, p. 21.
[59] WARD, Brian, *Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South*, cit.

much since they raised money from local African Americans. Most of the money generated through advertising by the radio was going to the owners while the black staff was still treated differently and largely underpaid.

Fig. 1.: «Listener loyalty: KYOK has more by far », Houston, Texas, 1965 SC 89. Special collection, George Nelson Collection, Archives of African American Music and Culture.

The OK Group has also remained famous in black-appeal radio history for its policy regarding nicknames. Monikers were common among DJs and usually chosen by them to underline a particular trait, a valuable one. Thus, male DJs chose names that promoted their intelligence as doctors (Dr Jive, Dr Blues, Dr Daddy-O) and their masculinity (Hot Rod, Playboy, Honeyboy). Female DJs, who were involved in the struggle as much as males, traditionally opted for nicknames that underlined empowering femininity, such as Star, Angel, Queen, etc. But the OK Group didn’t let its employees choose and imposed interchangeable nicknames that belonged to the company and sounded more child-like. The men were Okey Dokey (children’s TV program)[60], Hotsy Totsy (literally «hot kid»); while the women were Dizzy Lizzy or Zing Zang. When they left, or if they were fired, they had to renounce the name and all the OK Group had to do was to find another DJ sounding pretty much the same to fill in. It meant that they owned the personality which made their success. DJs were deprived of what made them unique.

Consequently, during the 1960s, tension rose in the studio. In the OK Group, on KYOK, the DJs organized and threatened to go on strike if management didn’t let them choose their name. They also demanded a black manager from their ranks, which they obtained in 1971[61]. Like many others, the race of management became a tremendous issue. Thus, in WJMO, a Cleveland black-

[60] «The Adventures of Oky Doky» was a children’s TV program on DuMont Network from november 1948 to May 1949.
[61] BARLOW, William, *Voice Over*, cit., p. 250.

appeal station from a different owner, the situation became explosive in 1970. Working conditions for black employees were denounced but the strike that took place was essentially engaged to express the need for black representation in management. The team, supported by the SCLC, went through firing but eventually settled a deal with the owner to have one of the black DJ, Ken Hawkins, become General Manager of the station. The outlet took a radical turn from then on and involved itself with the NAACP[62]. In Birmingham, Alabama, WRMA's black employees went on strike and added what is called a secondary boycott: they went after the advertiser to convince them to withdraw from their contract until the owners removed the white manager, Lee Lunsford, for a black one. In 1973, Lunsford sued them for racial discrimination, a case that would repeat itself several times in similar situations[63]. All these radios belonged to different owners, in different parts of the country, but they all experienced the same unrest. It means that DJs were able to mobilize their audience, either by threatening their loyalty to the outlet when they went on strike, or by calling upon their spending power to organize boycotts among advertisers. They were able to mobilize on such a scale because they had gained recognition among their audience, relying on their personality and most of all, on the music they provided. Without the enthusiasm towards pop and black-identified music that they contributed to build, this kind of activism would probably not have existed. What I want to stress here is that the connection between music and the civil rights movement is often seen in lyrics and artists' political commitments. But the history of black-oriented radio enlights us in the way music serves as a commodity. In this case, it was first used to open a market, then to create a bond between DJs and their audience that was eventually sought after to politicize their workplace, improve their working conditions and restore their dignity.

Nevertheless, the blatant militancy undertaken by associations such as the Fair Play Committee eventually slowed down in the 1970s and the efforts in the radio industry shifted to the more discrete question of black ownership. DJs' activism declined, following the decreasing place of music in radio, rivaled by news and talk formats. In 1970, there were more than 8000 stations in the country, 310 of which were black-oriented and only 16 were black-owned. It represented only 0,002% of the total market, and 5,1% of the black-appeal market[64]. Several organizations emerged to carry the project of black-ownership, but the most successful were the National Association of Black Owned Broadcasters (NABOB) and the National Black Media Coalition (NBMC). They pressured particular stations, but also lobbied the government to gain a more favorable legislature for minority media ownership. After almost a decade of lobbying the

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[62] *Billboard*, 21 February 1970, p. 36.

[63] WRMA Broadcasting Co., Inc. v. Hawthorne, 365 F. Supp. 577 (M.D. Ala. 1973), URL: < https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/365/577/1414368/ > [accessed on 24 January 2023].

[64] FERRETTI Fred, «The White Captivity of Black Radio», in *Columbia Journalism Review*, 9, 2/1970, pp. 35-40.

FCC and the NAB finally approved measures to bolster minority radio ownership in 1978. Firstly, it enabled owners selling to minorities to get tax credits ; secondly, it allowed owners facing the possibility of not getting their license renewed to sell their radio to minorities at a discounted price - rather than lose everything. And it worked, the number of black-owned black-appeal radio stations substantially rose during the 1980s, to attain 200 in 1992[65]. However, as soon as these measures were abolished in the 1990s in a Republican-controlled Congress, the numbers started to drop again[66].

Nonetheless, as we have seen, the issue of ownership did not always determine the radicality of politics undertaken by the radio. In New York, a Harlem-based radio called WLIB was thriving while owned by Harry Novick, a white entrepreneur who had ruled for two decades. In 1972, after a long campaign to force him out, it was bought by a black company. Ironically, the radical politics that took place under Novik's leadership slowly decreased and the radio turned out to be a leading outlet in the advent of Urban Contemporary format on its FM outlet (WBLS)[67]. The idea was to mix black music with pop in order to attract both black and white audiences and therefore diversify the advertising, appealing also to national ones. Its most popular DJ in the process, Frankie Crocker, eventually crossed over to a major radio focusing on white audiences through top 40 (WMCA) and was later identified as a turning point in the de-politicization of black-focused radio[68]. Indeed, the main issue was to retain advertisers. Radical politics could scare off most of the clients and ruin a radio. This is what happened with KAGB-FM in Los Angeles, managed and owned by Clarence Avant, a former NATRA's new breed leader, which turned out to be a commercial disaster. On the other hand, WLIB could broadcast black power speeches while it was still under the supervision of Harry Novick. The sale of the station to African American entrepreneur Percy Sutton did not raise the level of radicality, on the contrary. It is possible to assume that a white owner could more easily calm down advertisers afraid to be associated with a radio spreading black power slogans. Advertisers could assume black power slogans would remain words as long as ownership was cold-headed, and white. Since financial stability eventually relied completely on advertising, this is where a politicized black-oriented radio found its limit. Consumption could be used in a struggle between staff and management. However, in the United States, a radio needs to be lucrative in the end. Since all these projects still relied mostly on white advertisers, politics could only go as far as these key actors tolerated.

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[65] «Minority Commercial Broadcast Ownership, Appendix B », National Telecommunications and Information Administration, Washington DC, 1998, URL: < https://www.ntia.doc.gov/legacy/opadhome/minown98/appendix-b.htm > [accessed on 9 January 2023].
[66] BARLOW, William, *Voice Over*, cit., p. 258.
[67] *Ibidem*, pp. 250-252.
[68] GEORGE, Nelson, *The Death of Rhythm & Blues*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1988.

Furthermore, the defense of black staff in radio did not last partly because the organizations created (NATRA, FPC, etc.) were not unions. The failure of a massive unionization of black DJs would actually doom both black and white DJs. The AFTRA, who never merged with NATRA in the late 1960s, despite some alleged convergence in 1968, eventually abandoned DJs to focus more on actors, for commercials and cinema. Their alliance shifted to SAG (Screen Actors Guild) and the profession of DJ as a star lost most of its shine during the 1980s, while radio formats prevented personalities and former DJ took the path to nightclubs[69].

6. Conclusion

We have seen how the history of black-appeal radio can be a useful window to uncover the politics of the 1960s that tend to be shrouded under a veil of iconic civil rights battles. Rooted in labor history, looking at the workplace as an arena for political negotiations, I have tried to show how disc-jockeys can help us reconsider the scope of politics in the 1960s. Once they realized the power they could wield, they seized the opportunities of the market to demand further rights. Yet, the politicization of individuals may hardly reverse the structures that bind them, especially economic ones. Thus, the weaponizing of African American consumption through boycotts and strikes did not change the overall ownership of radios in the USA. And the legislation that helped minority ownership for a time did not last long enough. Furthermore, ownership might not be the ultimate goal regarding black-oriented radio, since African American-owned radios did not always tend to be more political. It is reasonable to say that the question of advertising was largely underestimated within the « black radio » movement.

Nonetheless, with its tortuous path, this history allows us to see how black music was used in different strategies to attract the African American consumer. Either to take advantage of their spending power or to forge an alliance between the listener and the platter-spinner against white managers and owners, black music served as an identity-trigger. The fact that African American communities reacted positively in both cases tells us that this music was profoundly imbedded within the fabric of these communities[70]. Yet, music has no inherent power regarding political action. As a commodity, it is subordinate to the ambitions of whoever organizes its circulation.

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[69] BREWSTER, Bill, BROUGHTON, Frank, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*, cit.
[70] BURNIM, Mellonee V., MAULTSBY, Portia K. (edited by), *African American Music: An Introduction*, New York, Routledge, 2005.

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URL: < https://www.studistorici.com/progett/autori/#LeBras >