

A New Kind of Blue: The Power of Suggestion & the Pleasure of Groove in Robert Glasper's *Black Radio*

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Abstract: This essay places the important Robert Glasper Experiment recording “Black Radio” (2012) within its artistic, commercial, and critical contexts. As a project that combines genres, “Black Radio” did more than challenge different communities of listeners; it invited them to see how Glasper’s sonic juxtapositions could be logically aligned. Jazz, hip-hop, R&B, and gospel merge in “Black Radio” to form a stylish, forward-looking contribution that won popular and critical successes. Glasper and his ensemble toy with the social contracts that have established boundaries around sonic language; indeed, he makes their territories feel seamless and natural. Because of the success of the project, we may be witnessing a post-genre moment that disrupts traditional ideas about music that have been preciously held in the industry since it emerged in the late-nineteenth century.

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“Changing the game!” exclaimed the press photographer at pianist Robert Glasper’s standing-room-only appearance at World Café Live in Philadelphia in the spring of 2012. “Yeah, no doubt,” a middle-aged man shot back in enthusiastic agreement. The mid-sized auditorium was filled with an interracial, intergenerational crowd of listeners enveloped in the mesh of sound worlds that Glasper presented with both commitment and ease.

The audience’s enthusiasm for the Robert Glasper Experiment’s landmark 2012 release *Black Radio* (Blue Note) – and its accompanying promotional tour – was affirmed by the American music industry’s arbiters of taste. To much surprise, *Black Radio* received a Grammy Award nomination in two categories: Best R&B Performance for “Gonna Be Alright (F.T.B.),” featuring Ledisi; and Best R&B Album. Even before it debuted, there was steady buzz about what the recording’s aesthetic approach and its critical reception might mean to the future of jazz. Now, in the wake of its release, it is

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clear that *Black Radio*'s influence extends well beyond the jazz world, as evidenced by the R&B branding. Like Miles Davis's pivotal 1959 album *Kind of Blue*, which signaled a new direction for modern jazz, *Black Radio* may indeed qualify as a game changer.

N*New York Times* music critic Nate Chinen wrote that *Black Radio* was "the rare album of its kind that doesn't feel strained by compromise or plagued by problems of translation."¹ Such a synthesis of styles is quite a feat given that jazz, R&B, and hip-hop have developed dissimilar social contracts with audiences, a chasm made glaringly clear by hip-hop's emergence as a commodity in the 1980s and the almost contemporaneous "young lions" movement that shot Wynton Marsalis and his co-conspirators of young, mostly male jazz musicians to stardom. In public and private discourse, these neo-classicist hard boppers were pitted against the sample-filled digital soundscapes of hip-hop producers ("they are not even 'real' musicians") and their rapping, rhyming counterparts ("they are *really* not musicians"). Although some critics could engage with each of these sound worlds, many listeners remained wedged between polarizing aesthetic discussions that inspired a politics of division.

That was the 1980s. Dramatic changes in the recording industry over the last fifteen years have opened up new creative opportunities for artists, and musicians are taking full advantage of them. Talented independent engineers and producers, armed with relatively high-quality personal recording studios, have increased exponentially; it's now a literal cottage industry. And because of the digital revolution, which provided cost-effective access to cutting-edge technologies, many musicians have become astute in engineering and production in addition to

their more traditional competencies in composition and performance, as well as in marketing and promotion. This newfound freedom has allowed ambitious musicians and producers to break out of genre boxes and craft conceptually adventurous projects. Some creators intentionally share their work free-of-charge on the social media sites Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube before they actually "drop" through traditional commercial avenues. Many recordings appear only in these online outlets and attract thousands of listeners without the help of a record label.

A new music economy has been established, in which record and marketing executives no longer exclusively determine what music is entitled to widespread dissemination. One of the most exciting results of this shift is that informal musical collectives have begun to work across genre lines (those imaginary sonic boundaries that exclude more than they invite), creating new audience alliances as well. Although he is contracted with Blue Note, the label historically associated with "straight-ahead" jazz, Glasper proves himself in his latest release to be in the avant-garde of this exciting new aesthetic wave.

That is not to say that there are not sonic precursors to *Black Radio*'s appealing new sounds. Chinen's article mentions a few such milestone performers: Miles Davis, Guru, A Tribe Called Quest, De La Soul, and Roy Hargrove. Each artist/group has produced projects that blend elements of jazz with those of other popular styles. We can push the list back further in time to include innovators like pianist Ramsey Lewis, the father of "soul-jazz," who has continued to build a vibrant career sliding effortlessly across the jazz/pop continuum. The clear-headed and creative adventurer Herbie Hancock, too, stands as a towering inspiration to genre-crossing artists, both in spirit and in technical execution.

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And we must not overlook, as is all too often the practice, the important women contributors to this aesthetic shape-shifting sensibility. Gospel great Elbernita "Twinkie" Clark's songwriting, singing, and Hammond B-3 playing did much to set that genre on an unapologetic and sonically ecumenical path throughout the 1980s and beyond. Pianist and composer Patrice Rushen's work boasted a prescient eclecticism that surely provided neo-soul rhythm and acid jazz tracks some of their harmonic approaches. Bassist and songwriter Meshell Ndegeocello's virtuosic musicianship and fluency in hip-hop, pop, funk, soul, and jazz – and the singular and courageous way she combines the genres – must be considered a signpost in this discussion.

As a subject of written criticism and promotion, as a live performance event, and as a recording, *Black Radio* deserves our careful attention. But precisely what part of the *Black Radio* project suggests that we are in the midst of a post-genre moment, a wholesale realignment of the traditional social contracts governing music creation, dissemination, and consumption in the industry? *Black Radio*'s sense of aesthetic balance – of getting it just right – is key to our understanding, and it may be derived from two provocative musical choices: 1) a self-conscious foregrounding of digital technology in the soundscape, including tricked-out mixes and effects, among other techniques; and 2) a harmonic palette drawn from the progressive post-bop vocabulary, featuring close, infectious harmonies that pivot around common tones and shifting tonal centers. The songs are otherwise characterized by the careful alignment of sonic symbols from across the historical black popular music soundscape. Here, Glasper's aesthetic strategy positions him to assuage the traditionalist

criticism of his dual pedigree in hip-hop and jazz, while also providing ample space for experimentation.

Beginning with an impressive set of trio recordings in the tradition of, most obviously, bebop pianist Bud Powell (always a litmus test for the modern jazz pianist), Glasper's recorded output gradually moved into other conceptual and sonic territories. Brands are powerful entities, particularly in the music industry. Although he claims roots in gospel, R&B, jazz, and hip-hop, Glasper entered into public awareness as a "jazz pianist," and it is hard to break away from that rubric once it sticks. The same is true for any artist whose work is marketed in a system that makes money from rigid predictability. This "agreement" becomes a social contract that ultimately seeks to dictate what artists produce, how companies sell content, and the spending and listening habits of specific demographics. Although Glasper was branded as a jazz musician, he has also maintained highly visible collaborations with the revered hip-hop producer and beat-maker J Dilla (James Dewitt Yancey) and the rapper Q-Tip (of the critically acclaimed group A Tribe Called Quest).

What we think of as the essence of jazz today developed during the 1940s bebop revolution. As historian Scott DeVeaux has explained:

In the wake of bebop, we no longer think of jazz improvisation as a way of playing tunes but as an exacting art form in itself that happens, as a rule, to use popular music as a point of departure. In the hands of a jazz improviser, a copyrighted popular song is less text than pretext. Its crucial identifying feature – melody – is erased in the heat of improvisation, leaving behind the more abstract and malleable level of harmonic pattern. Out of the ashes of popular song comes a new structure, a new aesthetic order, shaped by the intelligence and virtuosity of the improviser; and it is to that structure,

and that structure alone, that our attention should be drawn.²

This aesthetic order, grounded in virtuoso spectacle, has been both a blessing and a curse; it is an ideal that has, on the one hand, created expressions of sublime beauty and, on the other, eroded the economic base of the once popular music with exercises in abstraction that some claim are too difficult to decipher.

The world of hip-hop, Glasper's other pedigree, has its own social contract and historical groundings, though some of its more infamous themes of nihilism, misogyny, and political confrontation have tended to eclipse the dynamism of its defining musical traits. Nonetheless, as a system of organized sound, it has (like contemporary gospel music) flaunted an irreverent and irrepressible voracious muse, absorbing sound elements as quickly as they appear in the public sphere. Likewise, hip-hop has demonstrated similar senses of portability together with the reinforcement and transcendence of ethnic identities as they have been bound to specific sound organizations.

Glasper's *Black Radio* project intelligently and artfully indexes these histories. Indeed, all of the sonic and social agreements of hip-hop, jazz, and gospel (Glasper grew up playing in church) congeal in thoughtful, groove-based arrangements on the album (and in the live shows, though in different ways). When we consider the crafty details of the songs, their conceptual and technological framing, their harmonic environment and relationship to popular song, their virtuosic performances, and their accessibility and even spirituality, we can better understand *Black Radio* as an example of "post-genre" black music. The project plays with sonic, social, and iconic symbols in a way that recalibrates calcified, boring ideas about genre, and turns them on their head with a good sense of funky adventure.

As the music scholar and cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal has written in his insightful review of *Black Radio*, the use of the terms *post-genre* and *black music* might seem oxymoronic.³ What Neal is indicating, of course, is that the concept "genre" operates as an index of sound *and* the social ideas assigned to it. In other words, people socially agree on what sounds mean, to what community they "belong," and what extra-musical connotations they might convey. So if it is post-genre, where does blackness fit in?

Neal's meditation on the project situates Glasper's *Black Radio* in the historical context of black American radio stations, which reinforced the personal connection between Glasper's album and my experiences growing up listening to the Chicago-based station WVON (Voice of the Negro). Chess Records executives Leonard and Phil Chess owned the AM station from 1963 until Leonard's death in 1969. They programmed it all: gospel, blues, jazz, R&B, pop, and because it was Chicago, some more blues. Musical eclecticism defined the station's community of listeners, linking the generations with an "open-eared," aesthetically patient temperament: one of *your* songs was surely coming up next. Tellingly, when I visited Glasper's hometown of Houston a few years back, I noticed the same ecumenical historical consciousness on its radio stations.

But we have largely lost our expansive tastes to the corporate pressures put on program directors to maintain the strict social contracts of genre. And this is the very reason that audiences (and, ironically, the industry) have enjoyed *Black Radio*'s nod back to that more eclectic time, and why I use the forward-looking term post-genre to capture the project's pulse, contour, and impact.

Every track on *Black Radio* rewards – a high standard not often met these days,

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particularly with projects of this size. The most attractive sonic features, as I have stated above, derive from how the digital aspects of the recording share the foreground with Glasper's signature harmonic approach. Another feature that departs from the jazz social contract, as laid out by DeVeaux, is how the project is consciously not dominated by heroic virtuoso solos. These fresh elements, of course, also contributed to *Black Radio's* Grammy nominations in the R&B category, rather than in Glasper's "brand" category, jazz.

Glasper's individualized progressive post-bop vocabulary is instantly recognizable. The project collapses this approach, however, with another aesthetic: gospel music. One cannot help but associate the way that his talented band—Derrick Hodge (bass), Casey Benjamin (vocoder, flutes, saxophone), and Chris Dave (drums)—hit strong pocket grooves with all the deep soul of a sanctified Pentecostal band. They languish over the rhythmic and harmonic possibilities of these grooves, subtly twisting, turning, and burning as if these manipulations were the point of the whole endeavor. With all the dramatic innovations that have recently occurred in gospel music, one quality has held strong: the love of repetitive grooves that work the spirit, providing a platform for some of the most moving singing and instrumental improvisations in the industry. *Black Radio* brims with this groove-centered aesthetic.

Take Glasper's rendition of "Cherish the Day," a cover of the chanting groove-tress herself, Sade. The original, released in 1993, is emblematic of a core aesthetic of urban pop styles of the last twenty years: verse/chorus song forms built on identical chord structures. This quality has become ubiquitous in R&B/urban soul songwriting because of the spillover effect of hip-hop's cyclic loops. What separates Glasper's interpretation of this

overused technique, however, is that his ensemble has taken the concept—an analog interpretation of a digital concept—and injected the improvisational freedom of the jazz/fusion/funk sonic complex. Consider Casey Benjamin's unpredictable and expressive synth solo on "Cherish the Day"—doubled in parallel intervals throughout. It is a husky statement reminiscent of Chick Corea's *Elektric Band* of the 1980s. How the band keeps the groove pitched just hotter than a simmer beneath his improvisation is a marvel of group interplay. It sounds like a very hip church fanning up some community spirit. Why rush through it for radio's sake? Moving the spirit takes time.

With regard to female singers, there is plenty here to appreciate. There is the newcomer, Ledisi, the firebrand vocalist with grit, riffs, and range; Meshell Ndegeocello's warm molasses presentation; Christette Michele's breathy and sensuous croon; Erykah Badu, the priestess of the neo-soul movement of the 1990s; and Layla Hathaway, daughter of the iconic singer Donny Hathaway, who possesses her father's same appealing melismatic execution. Hathaway's reworking of "Cherish the Day" exhibits the best qualities of her vocal presentation: an open-throated, well-supported, and sultry alto voice, captured effectively by the studio engineer. Breathily vowels abound as she moves through tasty melodic lines, working over chord changes like her father, but with much more economy. Lesser-known female singers, sisters Amber and Paris Strother and Anita Bias, offer further neo-soul-ish warmth to the project.

The stylistic inclusivity is not limited to the performers; note how Chris Dave's drum sound is engineered in places to throw back to early-1990s hip-hop samples. Meanwhile, the lavish background vocals on the old school slow jam "Oh, Yeah," featuring Musiq Soulchild and

Ms. Michele, harken back to R&B duet sensations Donny Hathaway and Roberta Flack, but with the complexities of a Jaguar Wright multitrack vocal symphony. And Glasper's acoustic solo after minute four of the track – a tasty ride over a Fender Rhodes drenched soundscape – suggests how this recording might have sounded if long instrumental solos had been the emotional focal point of this project.

Scattered and unusual mixes, electronic effects, stylistic juxtapositions, fade-ins, oral declamations, and rhythmic chants combine to frustrate efforts to “place” this music. The most experimental tracks, showcasing the male voices of Lupe Fiasco, Bilal, Shafiq Husayn, Stokely, and Mos Def, crisscross generic markers with diz-

zying aplomb. Packaged with a statement by writer Angelika Beener – less liner note than manifesto – the album announces itself as something new, a turn toward breaking out of the sonic/marketing formulas so prevalent in today's industry offerings. The most important aspect of this “announcement,” however, is this: *Black Radio* allows the music to do the real preaching. Thus, we hear the band's “post-genre” gesture as a suggestion, not a mandate. In other words, only the music in the *totality* of our experience, music that is boundaryless, market-resistant, artistically adventurous, and conceptually focused can take black music back. Free black music!

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Nate Chinen, “The Corner of Jazz and Hip-Hop,” *The New York Times*, February 24, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/26/arts/music/robert-glasper-experiment-to-release-black-radio.html?pagewanted=all>.
- ² Scott DeVeaux, “‘Nice Work If You Can Get It’: Thelonious Monk and Popular Song,” *Black Music Research Journal* 19 (2) (Autumn 1999): 172.
- ³ Mark Anthony Neal, “Liberating *Black Radio*: The Robert Glasper Experiment,” *The Huffington Post*, March 9, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mark-anthony-neal/black-radio-album-review_b_1326449.html.