

# THE EVOLUTION OF BLACK MUSIC

by Tyra Triche

**B**lack music has “that thang,” says Kamila Muhammad, a musician and recent graduate of the Bienen School of Music. “That thang” is something you can’t really put your finger on, but you know it’s there. You hear it, you feel it, and you love it. The best way to explain it would simply be heart and soul, something that Black music wouldn’t be the same without. While the many genres of Black music in America, like blues, rock, jazz, and trap, may seem wildly different, this is the common thread linking them all together.

Music has always been important to Black people and Black culture in this country. While slaves were legally not allowed to be literate, they chose song and dance as ways to document their stories of joy, pain, and struggle. Music gave Black people a voice. Negro spirituals, the blues, jazz, and so on, were all ways for Black people to communicate in a special way only

Black music to develop and flourish. Brittney Proctor, a graduate student at Northwestern studying Black popular music with an emphasis on Black funk musicians of the 70’s, compares Black music to an encyclopedia.

“You have all these different entries inside an encyclopedia, but ultimately it refers to the same text,” Proctor explained. She says that Black music has this same intertextuality that an encyclopedia has, taking note of the overlay of many black music genres — for example, blues, soul, and rhythm & blues all borrow and build upon each other. It is also important to notice how popular the sampling of old records was in hip hop of the 90’s and still is today.

The biggest aid in the continuous progression of Black music, and the transformation of blues to trap, is the development of the internet and the ever-evolving world of technology. Professor Weheliye calls attention to

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they could understand.

In America, the blues was the first form of popular music and its origin can be found within the spirituals and field songs of slavery. Through music Black people created a voice and a language made specifically for their ears. Over time this unique sound crossed over to many audiences.

Alexander Weheliye, an African American Studies professor at Northwestern, says the blues gained so much popularity because of the newfound technologies used to record and spread music. As its Southern, rural roots were urbanized, it reached across the nation, becoming the first form of Black music accepted into popular culture.

From here the blues became a stepping stone for other genres of

how turntables completely revolutionized hip-hop in the 80’s and 90’s.

He also notes how recent technology now allows musicians to create from home. These resulting mixtapes, or underground CDs, usually free to the public, were important to contemporary hip-hop and rap, but essential in the development and distribution of early trap music.

Thaddeus Tukes, a Bienen School of Music graduate, points out how computer programs have further changed the way that music is created. Instead of just sampling and mixing, producers are now able to “take a bass drum in the program and just mess with the soundwave. Now you get this real big, booming, resonating sound,” Tukes explained. With this technology, trap music took off.

With the internet and recent technology came the ability to produce more music and spread it to a global audience. This globalization of Black music is both a good and bad thing, according to Muhammed.

“It sort of makes it feel like there are infinite possibilities with what you can do,” Muhammad says, but she also feels like it has given any and everyone a platform to insert their contribution to Black music, while not every one of those people is serious about the artform.

Proctor felt similarly. As is evident in many facets of Black culture, as Black music gains popularity, appropriation becomes even more apparent. Because it is so much easier now for non-black identified people to create and spread “Black music,” she says there are so many more questions to ask.

“What is the role of Black popular music because of its popularity now and because of

its accessibility by so many non-Black people?” Proctor questions. “What is Black music? Who is allowed to create it? Can black people once again have something for themselves that is created by themselves?”

As for the future of Black music? Perhaps there will be a definite breakdown in strict genres, as the lines continue to blur. But more concretely, there seems to be one statement all could agree on. Black music will remain important to the Black community as a tool for storytelling. From documenting our struggles through the blues to expressing our joys in booming trap beat, Black music will always be our way to be heard.