

# THE CRESSSET

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## Jungle Music

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WHEN I WAS A BOY, I could get my newest favorite song on a forty-five to repeat endlessly if I raised the arm on my suitcase-sized record player and set it to the side.

That's exactly how I played songs when I first bought the records and carried them home in a bag shaped exactly to the size of forty-fives from National Record Mart or Sam Goody's. That bag announced its contents as unmistakably as the ones from the Pennsylvania State Liquor Store. Nothing else came in them.

When I arrived home, I inserted the plastic circle (doochiekeys, my mother called them; she bought me a few dozen one day as her investment in my entertainment) into the hole in the middle so the record fit over the spindle that was made for albums and seventy-eights that only parents owned.

One boy on my street had a magical cylinder he attached over the spindle on his turntable. He could pile up six forty-fives on it, put the arm over, and watch them fall, one by one, into place, six songs in a row before the music stopped. It was wonderful, and for a while I begged my mother to buy one for me, but I began to notice that after three or four records had fallen, the music usually began to waver in a sort of musical Doppler Effect because one of the records was slightly warped and the pile exaggerated the distortion. If that boy had a favorite record that was even slightly warped, he needed to place it at the bottom of the pile.

Fortunately, I didn't need that magical cylinder to experience the joy of playing my new record a dozen times in a row, a half hour of hearing Elvis or Buddy Holly or Jerry Lee Lewis, who, according to my parents, was the worst of the white rock and rollers, someone who was surely headed to hell.

But no matter how awful Jerry Lee Lewis seemed singing "Great Balls of Fire," he was still light years less bad for my wellbeing than Little Richard, who my parents believed was possessed by the Devil himself. "Jungle music," they called Little Richard's songs—"Tutti Frutti," "Long Tall Sally," and their flip sides that I played to get my money's worth.

That was about as far as my parents let speak their prejudice, but my uncles on my father's side called it "Nigger music," and neither their wives nor anyone else in my family told them to keep their mouths shut.

I didn't pay much attention. I heard the same assessment in the same words in the homes of most of my friends. By the end of sixth grade, I knew there were original versions of more than Little Richard songs that were covered by white singers. My parents loved Pat Boone, even when he put out a ludicrous recording of "Tutti Frutti," but they had no idea the song they loved, "Dance with Me, Henry" by Georgia Gibbs, was a reworked cover of the wonderfully obscene "Work with Me, Annie" by Hank Ballard and the Midnighters. When it came time to get radio play, race mattered, even though there were exceptions like Chuck Berry who crossed over to the mostly white Top Forty.

By the time I was twelve, I was listening to the two black stations in Pittsburgh, and most of my white records began to sound tame. Only the Del Vikings, who were actually from Pittsburgh and the first integrated rock group, sounded exciting when they ran through "Come Go With Me" and "Whispering Bells," both of which paled beside the Isley Brothers "Shout," the song that drove my father to slam the door of my room as the singer moaned "a little bit louder now."

## THE CRESSET

WILY was named for Wiley Avenue, which ran through the heart of one of Pittsburgh's black neighborhoods, the Hill District. "Dialy Wily, Make You Smiley" was one of their jingles, and I did, turning the knob on the cheap red plastic radio my Aunt Margaret had given me for Christmas when I was in fifth grade because she knew exactly what I wanted.

The other was WAMO, that wonderful name for a radio station, which was high up on the dial where there was nothing else but static when the station signed off at sunset. In summer, it stayed on until 9:00, but in winter, WAMO, and WILY as well, signed off as early as 4:45, leaving me with only the predominantly white rock and roll of KQV.

Even worse, WILY changed its call letters soon after I started listening, becoming WEEP ("Weep for joy," its jingle said). One afternoon, with no warning, they announced the change by playing "Just Born (To be your Baby)" by Perry Como, who both my parents adored.

I owned one Perry Como record from my early days of buying records—"Catch a Falling Star"—and I'd played it five or six times in a row when I'd bought it, but by now I had that record and others like it hidden in my closet. The end of WILY was a sad day for "jungle music."

So I listened to WAMO, especially Porky Chedwick, the only white disc jockey who worked there. He played black music and white music that sounded black—doo-wop, rhythm and blues—songs I never heard anywhere else by groups called The Channels, The Solitaires, and The Nutmegs.

About that time one of my uncles told me it was time to stop tying my tie in a "nigger knot." "I can't get your father to change his ways, but you can," he said, twisting my tie in the church men's room from behind while I looked at his hands around my throat in the mirror. "Get it?" he said. "That's called a Windsor knot. Now you look like you weren't born in a box."

For weeks, while I practiced on the other two ties I owned, I didn't untie that knot. And then I left all three tied for another month until I had the confidence to start from scratch on Sunday morning as ninth grade began. My father never said a word about my knots, but for the first time I was ashamed of how he looked on Sunday morning.

That first month of school somebody on a bus full of students after an away football game dropped down his window and hollered, "Bo Diddley is a gunslinger" toward a crowd of black students from the other high school. Guys on our bus laughed, and when that boy leaned out to shout it again, he was hit in the forehead with a piece of concrete block.

I loved Bo Diddley, and that phrase was the name of one of his recent songs. The boy took a dozen stitches, and the following week in school friends of mine were still talking about it, always with laughter. I didn't ask any of them a question. It was like not getting the punch line of a dirty joke. I wasn't going to be the boy who let everyone know he didn't get it.

I played basketball on the ninth-grade team, and for the first time walked onto the gym floor of a school where the other players were mostly black. Our cheerleaders did a routine to "Dance with Me, Henry" that had lines like "So if you want to get a letter/For your varsity sweater/Then stay in training... Ooh-oo-wee" just before the cheerleaders from the other school did provocative dance steps, their hips shaking and their short skirts flaring out to exposed red underwear. Those cheerleaders didn't sit down while we warmed up. They worked their bodies along the sideline to music that blared from two small speakers by the scorer's table. Every song was jungle music, and our all-white team grew silent as we did our layup drills.

"You scared, white bread?" the boy who guarded me kept saying as the game wore on. "You look scared."

I kept my lips sealed, trying not to give myself away, but I was convinced he was a better player just because he was black, even when we pulled ahead and won the game. It wasn't my fault we won. I scored four points, two of them on free throws, and spent half the game watching from the bench. There wasn't one black student in my entire school district, even though it was twice as large as the school we'd been playing.

On the bus after the game, though nobody said the word "nigger," I could hear boys talking about beating "those coons" and "those spearchuckers." The coach sat two seats in front of me and acted like he never heard.

The following year, before our first league game on the road, the junior varsity coach gathered us together after the game. "It's a different world here," he said, "and it doesn't belong to any of you. You need to know enough not to leave the gym during the varsity game."

Sure enough, two players did. They walked to a convenience store a block from the school to buy junk food. When they left the store, names had been flung their way, and they'd run back to the gym with their potato chips. Nobody told the coach, but it was the last time anyone wandered away from the gym while the varsity played their game. On the way home, four guys from the varsity put together a rendition of the doo-wop classic "Gloria," a song I'd heard covered by five different groups on the Porky Chedwick Show. One of them, the back-up point guard, managed to get close when he went up the scale to warble "It's not Ma-rie!" and, a few seconds later, "It's not Sha-ree!"

## THE CRESSET

By the time I traveled with the varsity, there were rumors my high school would have to merge with three nearby smaller schools. The crowds grew larger at school board meetings. Parents said the quality of education would go down, but everybody knew they meant there would be black students in the schools, and, for sure, black families moving across the soon-to-be-blurred school district boundaries.

A few years earlier, there had been a song my parents loved called “Quiet Village,” an instrumental meant to suggest the jungle, complete with bird calls that sounded like the ones in Tarzan movies. Now when the Tokens, a white group, had a number one song with “The Lion Sleeps Tonight,” my father even sang along, straining into falsetto to get as close to mimicry as he could.

But on the bus, each time we traveled, somebody with a transistor radio would switch from station to station until a song by black artists came on. They were the only songs that didn’t get shouted down by half the team: “He’s a Rebel” by The Crystals as the varsity season began, “Shake a Tail Feather” by the Contours as the season ended, and “Little Latin Lupe Lu” by the Righteous Brothers who, someone insisted, were actually white.

By then I listened exclusively to jungle music. There was even another station, WZUM, that played music like the kind Porky Chedwick played, and though that station signed off at dusk, another one, WMCK, featured a nighttime disc jockey who played mostly jungle music until midnight so I could listen all that summer from dinner time to when I fell asleep.

I was just out of high school before I saw a live rock show—The Ad-Libs, Little Anthony, Joe Tex, and a singer named Walter Jackson who came out on crutches, hobbling as if he’d suffered from polio as a child. A girl from a nearby Catholic high school was sitting beside me. She was in love with the British Invasion, which had just begun, and if she was unexpectedly sitting in an audience that was 90 percent black, I didn’t care.

And when Walter Jackson leaned on those crutches and moaned, “Won’t somebody give their love to Walter?” a hundred or more girls stood up and shouted “Me” and “I will,” and I wanted to sound exactly like Walter Jackson when I reached for that girl an hour later. I wanted her to be in love with jungle music and the promises it made, not be the girl who allowed me to do everything but enter her because she was saving herself for a Catholic boy who would marry her and love her more for waiting.

A few months later my high school was integrated when the merger happened. That Catholic girl went off to a Catholic college in Michigan and wrote me two letters. I didn’t answer the second one. The Twist, the one black dance my aunts would do when a non-threatening black man (Chubby Checker) covered a threatening black man (Hank Ballard), had disappeared. I drank beer until I wasn’t self-conscious about doing the Mashed Potato and the Watusi. I finished my own first year of college and took another girl to see James Brown in Youngstown, Ohio, where 98 percent of the audience was black, and it’s still the best stage show I’ve ever seen. The few dozen whites there were up on their feet when James Brown did his famous cape show closer, falling to the ground, being wrapped in it by his entourage, and emerging to keep “Please, Please, Please” going and going, resurrected, and then resurrected a second time. The band worked the rhythm of the song until all of us, a few months before the black neighborhoods in nearby Cleveland and other American cities were burned during that summer’s race riots, were as sweaty and excited as he was, wishing that music would repeat itself until we all collapsed. †

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