CHAPTER 2

Is Groove African?

The suggestion that Western popular music derives at least some of its characteristics from African musical practices and traditions has penetrated deeply into writing and thinking about popular music. By far the most frequently cited of those characteristics, though not the only one, concerns rhythm: the notion that what gives much American popular music its particular emphasis on rhythm, its sense of ‘beat’, its syncopation, in short, its ‘groove’, has its origins in West African music, in particular, in the drumming which is a central element of the music of that part of the world.

The argument is made in many forms. In its widely diffused, commonsense version it amounts to the view that early Western popular music was a fusion between African rhythm and European harmony. Most theoretical and academic writing rejects such a simplistic notion, but the idea that the rhythms of ragtime, early jazz and rhythm and blues, which exercised such a formative influence over subsequent popular music genres, were essentially African rhythms appears repeatedly in the literature on popular music.

Such ideas form a spectrum from ‘strong’ versions of the theory which posit a highly racialised, quasi-genetic and very direct connection between the practices of African and black American musicians, to ‘weaker’, more culturalist versions of it which emphasise mediation and syncretisation in the processes by which stylistic traits are held to have been transmitted from one tradition to another. But one element is always present: the notion that Africa is the source while America and the West is the destination in this transmission process. Implicit in this theory is the concept of inheritance, the sense of musical traditions having been passed down the generations from some ancestral source, a sense captured in the term ‘roots music’.

There are two aspects of these arguments that demand investigation. The first concerns the mechanisms by which the supposed continuity between musical traditions from distinct parts of the world and different historical periods was achieved. Obviously, the idea of the African component of Western popular music rests on the forced migration of millions of Africans to the New World during the period of slavery. Often, cultural continuity is simply assumed from this fact, and little attempt to made to explain the means by which it occurs. After all, it seems evident that very few elements of the culture of West Africa in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, taken in its general sense as ‘way of life’, survived amongst twentieth-century African-Americans. Even
where it may be possible to identify an element of musical continuity, it is unlikely to have survived in a pure form, unchanged by the radically altered material circumstances under which it exists. To suggest otherwise, is to endorse an idealism which accords cultural and ideological phenomena an unwarranted autonomy.

One of the first ethnomusicologists to tackle the question of the relationship between African and American musics, Richard A. Waterman, initially describes the African elements that he detects in American music as 'influences' and 'survivals' that have resulted from the syncretism between African and European musical cultures which already had much in common, or at least, few traits that were in direct conflict with each other. Unlike other musical traditions in the world, 'almost nothing in European folk music ... is incompatible with African musical style, and much of the European material fits readily into the generalized African musical mold'. Here, at least, is the beginnings of a theory which aims to explain the conditions which allowed certain African musical practices to become part of a new, syncretised musical culture. The emphasis seems to be on fusion and hybridisation.

Waterman identifies a number of African features in American music, all of which are rhythm-related, and uses the term 'hot rhythm' to describe them. Associating 'hot rhythm' with 'Negro music' allows Waterman to posit a direct link between African music and jazz.

Those who have had opportunity to listen to Negro music in Africa or the New World have been almost unanimous in agreeing that its most striking aspect is its rhythm. ... Everywhere, Negro music differs from the music of impinging non-Negro groups in being 'hotter'.

Already, we have lost the sense of syncretism and fusion of traditions. Despite the assertion that this tradition is not racially inherited, 'hot rhythm' on this description clearly is a racial characteristic which appears in 'Negro music' everywhere it is to be found. The fact that Waterman makes no mention of the famous white exponents of jazz from his period, for example bandleaders like Benny Goodman, reinforces this interpretation.

One element of this rhythmic inheritance identified by Waterman is 'metronome sense', a facility required by African music which has manifested itself in jazz, and:

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1 Waterman 1951, p. 209.