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Cultural Policy in American Music History: Sammy Davis, Jr., vs. Juvenile Delinquency

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Abstract

In 1956 entertainer Sammy Davis, Jr., attempted to organize the music industry in a campaign against juvenile delinquency, using musical public service announcements to encourage teens to stay on the right side of the law. Although popular with the public and some industry insiders, Davis's idea failed, officially because of opposition from the Recording Industry Association of America. Although Davis's campaign went nowhere, we argue that this episode provides an important illustration of the need to broaden our understanding of cultural policy studies in the context of American music history. Specifically, we argue for an approach to policy analysis that draws on poststructuralist historiography to capture the forms that cultural policy takes in the United States, including the specific factors of race, intra-industry struggles, and the persona of Sammy Davis, Jr., himself, a pivotal figure who has been largely neglected by music historians despite embodying many of the key cultural tensions of postwar U.S. society. By examining the case of Sammy Davis, Jr., vs. Juvenile Delinquency, we can achieve a better understanding of how U.S. music, U.S. culture, and cultural policy intersect.

In 1956 entertainer Sammy Davis, Jr., attempted to organize the music industry in a campaign against juvenile delinquency, which at the time was widely perceived to be a major social problem and closely associated with rock 'n' roll music. Davis's plan foresaw an industry-backed council that would, among other things, coordinate the production of musical public service announcements encouraging teens to stay on the right side of the law. Although popular with the public and some industry insiders, Davis's idea ultimately came to naught, most proximately because of opposition from the Recording Industry Association of America. Despite Davis's campaign's failing to take off, however, this minor incident can reveal much about the complex struggles over cultural values and the achievement of social goals, especially as these struggles intersect with racial and corporate hierarchies, aesthetic and moral evaluations of different styles of music, and internal music industry battles.

Although the moral panic surrounding juvenile delinquency and rock 'n' roll is a well told story, in this essay we use Davis's failed campaign to present an approach to policy analysis in music history that draws on, but also attempts to enlarge, the emerging paradigm of critical cultural policy studies. We argue for an expansive view of "policy," one that considers not just state policy, or even state-industrial policy, but also the ways in which state and state-industrial cultural policy is augmented, supplemented, implemented, translated, resisted, localized, and lived by differently situated and empowered actors throughout society. In other words, we explore the different ways that cultural policy is formulated in the United States, how various institutions contribute to or implement that policy,

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Figure 1. Sammy Davis, Jr., performing in 1954. Photo courtesy of the March of Dimes.

and how music studies might utilize and incorporate such policy analyses. Cultural histories of policy struggles reveal more than the workings of policy; instead, policy can be a lens through which we can understand music history's intersection with social and cultural history. We bring to our analysis methods derived from poststructuralist historiography that attempt to account for the unpredictabilities

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of human action without neglecting the structural and political-economic limits to individual agency.

Part of this project of arguing for a more expansive view of policy involves analyzing the tensions between music as a tool of cultural policy and music as the object of policy. Policy studies tend to focus on regulatory and economic discourses: laws, technical specifications, the politics of arts funding, etc. In such discourses, music is frequently the object of policy, as in state subventions for “good” music (the National Endowment for the Arts’ significant support for jazz being a good example) or the control of “bad” music (e.g., the arrest of musicians and prosecution of music deemed “obscene,” as in the famous 1989 2 Live Crew case). Music itself, though, is also a policy tool that performs multiple policy functions, such as helping to educate children, conduct public diplomacy (as in the State Department’s cultural ambassador program), create social capital (e.g., the thousands of government-sponsored “Bluesfests” and “Folkjams” around the country each year intended to help build community), and much more. Aesthetic debates over “good/bad” or “moral/immoral” music, then, also shape the various roles that music plays as both target and instrument of cultural and social policy. To the extent that such taste hierarchies intersect with race, gender, and other social hierarchies, music functions to reconfigure social and economic struggles as aesthetic differences. The working out of policy thus becomes inseparable from the working out of social power, with music as one of the cultural channels through which such power flows.

Critical Cultural Policy Studies in American Music History

Current scholarship on cultural policy usually takes one of three forms. The first two are more traditional: legal studies, which examine the legal frameworks of media policy; and political economy, which tends to examine the intersections of media industries and politics, emphasizing economic power and economic motivations in the policy-making process. However, many scholars have pointed out the ways that these approaches tend to neglect other cultural factors in policy making or different forms of power and resistance. As a response, the last ten years have seen a rise in critical cultural policy studies, which draw on poststructuralist theory, especially French theorist Michel Foucault’s ideas about “governmentality.” Governmentality captures the ways in which cultural policy is not merely concerned with encouraging and supporting a vibrant cultural life, or simply protecting cultural markets or individual citizens from harmful or dangerous culture (as when the Federal Communications Commission fines broadcasters for indecency or when the music industry places parental advisory stickers on music albums), but also about maintaining social control and producing governable citizens by instilling loyalty to the state through culture.¹ It is about making citizens knowable and, ultimately, manageable: the “conduct of conduct.”²

¹ See, for example, Michel Foucault, “Governmentality,” trans. Rosi Braidotti, rev. Colin Gordon, in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 87–104.

² See, for example, Jeremy Packer, “Mapping the Intersections of Foucault and Cultural Studies: An Interview with Lawrence Grossberg and Toby Miller, October 2000,” in *Foucault, Cultural Studies*,

As a part of this trend, policy studies have gained increasingly greater prominence in music history scholarship in the last five years. The rise of digital media has injected new urgency and relevance into historically informed analyses of music policy, while the growth of critical cultural policy studies has reinvigorated academic approaches to policy history in media studies, cultural studies, and, as demonstrated by a recent issue of *Popular Music* devoted to policy issues,³ music studies as well. Recent analyses of cultural policy in music have focused on formulating national music policies, such as economic and institutional support for local and independent popular musicians, and the way these musical policies contribute to producing productive citizens and expressing national identity.⁴ For instance, Susan Harewood has analyzed how popular music policy in Barbados in the 1970s and 1980s worked to privilege certain forms of calypso that were deemed “authentic” or “true,” whereas other musical forms, particularly newer ones, were judged as “inauthentic.” This process, she claims, produced a “hierarchy of value” surrounding musical styles; for the Barbadian National Culture Foundation the “preservation and advancement of true calypso” was equivalent to “the preservation and advancement of civil society.”⁵ In other words, aesthetic evaluations of music are not simply about taste; they make music the object of policy in one sense (i.e., government programs providing subventions to some artists and not others) but the instrument of policy in another (bolstering state-sanctioned forms of civil society and narratives of nationalism).

Whereas previous studies of music and cultural policy have examined state-sponsored initiatives, we argue that cultural policy should be understood more generally as any plan of action, derived from a set of values and priorities and backed by some degree of institutional authority, that regulates the production and/or consumption of culture, including music. Thus policy encompasses more than a set of legal requirements that mandate or prohibit, and it occurs at vastly more sites than the “official” state level. In U.S. music history specifically, this broader approach to cultural policy has several advantages. First, it helps avoid an overly narrow emphasis on the state and “official” policy, which risks neglecting the odd forms that state cultural policy takes in the United States;⁶ in this regard it is unsurprising that governmentality studies—including all of the articles in the aforementioned policy issue of *Popular Music*—emerged primarily in studies of non-U.S. cultural policy. Second, a broad definition of policy challenges the problematic subtext that “official” policy *is* policy, or at least the only policy that matters, a view that we believe limits understanding of how policy is created and lived at different cultural sites and by differently empowered actors. In contrast,

and *Governmentality*, ed. Jack Z. Bratich, Jeremy Packer, and Cameron McCarthy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 23–46.

³ *Popular Music* 27/2 (May 2008).

⁴ Marcus Breen, “Popular Music Policy Making and the Instrumental Policy Behavior Process,” *Popular Music* 27/2 (May 2008): 193–208.

⁵ Susan Harewood, “Policy and Performance in the Caribbean,” *Popular Music* 27/2 (May 2008): 220.

⁶ Justin Lewis and Toby Miller, “Introduction,” in *Critical Cultural Policy Studies: A Reader*, ed. Justin Lewis and Toby Miller (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2003), 1–9.

we argue that important moments of policy making occur across a wide range of sites throughout society by differently empowered actors, challenging, in particular, the gendered framework that privileges public policy over domestic or subaltern policy formation. Third, when Foucauldian theory is used, the question almost invariably arises as to the role of agency and individual actors in the case at hand; this observation is not to say that such questions are necessarily problematic in any given study, but merely that such approaches to policy studies can be difficult to reconcile with the unpredictabilities of cultural production and reception.

Within music studies, scholars such as Christopher Small have argued for methodologies that embed music within larger sets of cultural practices,⁷ and the influence of cultural studies and other theoretical approaches has broadened the object of study to include audiences, social networks (including subcultures and scenes), industrial analyses, and the politics of culture. From the perspective of cultural policy studies, such work often touches on policy without explicitly connecting to or addressing a policy studies tradition. Thus, American music studies are already “doing” policy studies, even if the policy dimensions of music history are too infrequently made explicit. The most important exception, as noted above, is the recent critical cultural policy studies work that uses the lens of governmentality to look at state policy, state-industrial policy, and the range of institutional actors in and through which culture is shaped to meet the needs of national identity and produce cultural citizens.⁸

In summary, there are two ways in which we wish to push the relationship between American music history and policy studies. The first is to expand our notion of “policy” in order to give significantly greater attention to the range of sites at which cultural policy is produced, negotiated, or enforced; we thus examine not just state actors, but corporate actors, artists, and the press as cultural policy makers.⁹ Second, we use policy analysis as an entrée into social dynamics beyond governmentality and cultural citizenship, exploring questions of how we might adapt music history’s strengths in, say, the analysis of musical artists to policy studies. For example, what can analysis of cultural policy tell us about race in the music industries? Through what mechanisms was rock ‘n’ roll disassociated from juvenile delinquency and made relatively “safe” for white youth?

To answer such questions, we look at cultural policy through a combination of critical cultural history and political economy. We believe that this approach represents an alternative that might better fit the U.S. context than the state-industrial policy analyses of legal studies and political economy, one that can address the

⁷ Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

⁸ Lewis and Miller, “Introduction.”

⁹ Additionally, we would be happy to push this expansive notion of policy even further to include a much wider range of social actors even farther removed from centers of official political policymaking power. Our shorthand for this idea of subaltern policy is that a parent’s dictum, “No TV until your homework is done,” is cultural policy, and that such micropolicy is worth investigating. We have borrowed the term micropolicy from Stephen A. Merrill, “The Politics of Micropolicy: Innovation and Industrial Policy in the United States,” *Policy Studies Review* 3/3–4 (May 1984): 445–52.

tension between structural constraints and individual agency. We make no claim that such a combination is startlingly new (our approach shares some similarities with the field of institutionalism, albeit with a more historiographical emphasis), but only that it is a productive approach that deserves greater visibility within American music history studies. Specifically, we have adapted a framework from historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot, who argues that individuals participate in history in three ways: as agents who occupy multiple structural positions in society (such as “workers,” “slaves,” “mothers”); as actors who are confronted with historical particulars and, at a given moment in a specific historical context, *do* things; and finally as subjects, that is, as narrators of their own history defining the terms of their agency and actions.¹⁰ This approach, when supplemented with traditional political economy (i.e., looking at the intersections of economic institutions and politics), provides a viable framework for assessing the actions of individuals behaving unpredictably within cultural, economic, and policy-making institutions.

As detailed below, Sammy Davis, Jr.’s failed campaign is an interesting case study through which to begin testing this approach to cultural policy in music history—not only because Davis voluminously narrated his own history (producing a best-selling autobiography¹¹ and sitting for hundreds of interviews over his long career), but also because his agent-position in the 1950s as “Negro entertainer” was so often in tension with his own subjectivity and actions as a success story who had transcended race to achieve the “American Dream.” Indeed, the conflict between who Davis thought he was (Davis as subject and narrator of history), the actions he took based on that understanding (Davis as actor in history), and his peculiar status within the entertainment industry (Davis as agent in history), as well as the political-economic conditions operating within that industry at the time, help explain both why Davis attempted to implement anti-delinquency cultural policies and why that attempt failed.

Rock ’n’ Roll and Cultural Policy: “Don’t Be a Juvenile Delinquent”

It is hardly news that the emergence of rock ’n’ roll incited a moral and social panic in the 1950s, or that the condemnation of rock ’n’ roll was inseparable from the music’s racial content and fueled by rock’s association—imagined or otherwise—with juvenile delinquency and other antisocial behavior.¹² Bruce Tucker has rightly characterized this panic as a crisis in cultural authority; more precisely, the racialization of this panic, articulating rock ’n’ roll to the dangers of black primitivism and

¹⁰ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 23.

¹¹ Sammy Davis, Jr., Judy Boyar, and Burt Boyar, *Yes I Can: The Story of Sammy Davis Jr.* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965).

¹² See, for example, James Gilbert, *Cycle of Outrage: America’s Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). Juvenile delinquency in the 1950s was a catch-all phrase that could refer to anything from simple rudeness to slashing tires to full-on gang warfare. However, its greater significance was as a discourse that captured societal fears of moral and cultural decline, quite apart from specific criminal or antisocial acts, making it easy to elide with stigmatized forms of music and other culture.

the threat of miscegenation, made it specifically a crisis in white cultural authority.¹³ The panic subsided not when blackness was safely extirpated from the music, which arguably never completely happened,¹⁴ but rather when white cultural authority was reestablished by reimagining rock 'n' roll as a generational rather than a racial threat. As Tucker argues, the recuperation of rock 'n' roll "entailed shifting the discourse away from the issue of the [racial] Other embodied in significations of the body and transforming the controversy over rock 'n' roll into a harmless generational conflict."¹⁵ Furthermore, the articulation of rock to juvenile delinquency was but an intermediate step in this process: "In the space of a few years the threat of the racially ambiguous youth became the somewhat less threatening white juvenile delinquent and finally the merely comically exasperating teenager."¹⁶

In the fall of 1956, however, the moral panic surrounding rock 'n' roll and its potential connection to juvenile delinquency was still peaking, reaching a fever pitch in the wake of Elvis Presley's several television appearances that summer. James Gilbert situates the 1950s fear of juvenile delinquency within a larger and recurring debate over mass culture and its power to shape U.S. society, and especially to influence youth: "[I]n the postwar world, the changing behavior of youth, in terms of speech, fashions, music, and mores, appeared to erase the boundaries between highjinks and premature adulthood and even antisocial delinquency."¹⁷

It was precisely at the height of this moral panic that Sammy Davis, Jr., attempted to organize the music industry against juvenile delinquency. His plan was most clearly laid out in an open letter in the 12 September 1956 edition of *Variety*—in other words, within a week of Presley's legendary 9 September appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. Davis proposed the creation of a "Music Industry Council to Combat Juvenile Delinquency," with the heads of the record labels, talent agencies, and licensing agencies, as well as celebrities such as Joe DiMaggio and Perry Como, as its members and officers. Leading songwriters (for instance, Irving Berlin), he hoped, would write short jingles and songs on the theme "Don't Be a Juvenile Delinquent," and major recording stars would record one of these jingles each time they went into the studio. Disc jockeys would then be recruited to play the records under the banner "D.J.s fight J.D." Davis also wanted top stars to meet with youth groups and settlement houses to discourage juvenile delinquency, something he himself had done many times. As he summarized his rationale for the campaign, "The kids who have gone bad and the ones who might go bad will be constantly

¹³ Bruce Tucker, "'Tell Tchaikovsky the News': Postmodernism, Popular Culture, and the Emergence of Rock 'N' Roll," *Black Music Research Journal* 9/2 (Autumn 1989): 271–95.

¹⁴ The question of racial hybridization in popular music continues to inspire division and commentary. The most recent significant round was set off by the claim by Sasha Frere-Jones, music critic for the *New Yorker*, that "rock 'n' roll, the most miscegenated popular music ever to have existed, underwent a racial re-sorting in the nineteen-nineties" (176). Sasha Frere-Jones, "A Paler Shade of White: How Indie Rock Lost Its Soul," *The New Yorker* 83/32 (22 October 2007): 176–81.

¹⁵ Tucker, "Tell Tchaikovsky," 290.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 291.

¹⁷ Gilbert, *Cycle of Outrage*, 12. Another indicator of the widespread attention given to juvenile delinquency during this era is that in the fall of 1956, almost exactly when Davis was launching his campaign, Leonard Bernstein was finishing *West Side Story*. We thank David Anderson for reminding us of this cultural detail.

confronted with these subtle and not so subtle plugs. Eventually they will come to think once and again before violating the precepts laid down by our campaign.” Davis foresaw this campaign as a year-long effort that could also be extended to jukebox operators, the television networks, and the movie studios.¹⁸

Davis was encouraged by early positive responses to his plan. Many disc jockeys and teen organizations pledged their support, and several music industry notables immediately backed the campaign. The former vice-president of RCA, Manie Sacks, agreed to spearhead the effort, and Broadcast Music Inc. (BMI) president Carl Haverlin kicked in \$ 500 to get it started, arguing, “It is very likely that many youngsters can be influenced in the right direction if their favorites say the right and proper things. Isn’t this worth while to try?”¹⁹ Haverlin also appointed Russell Sanjek, Vice President for Public Relations, to serve as BMI’s special liaison to the Council.²⁰ *Variety*, a publication that was already on record as opposing the indecent “leerics” of many rock ’n’ roll and R&B songs, called the plan “an important all-industry, all-American mission” at a time when the United States was in the grip of “a juvenile crime wave of shocking proportions.”²¹ *Variety* especially liked Davis’s idea of using teen idols to speak directly to youth, who “[respect] only one force—the unpear-shaped chiding from a current idol.”²² Gossip columnist Walter Winchell, a powerful industry figure in his own way, also endorsed the plan,²³ as did music publicist (and Davis friend) Harriet Wasser, who wrote, “Sammy is continually fighting [for] the cause and he deserves a great deal of credit. . . . [He] is right in saying that the recording artists can do a lot to wipe out this teenage menace.”²⁴

Of particular interest is the support Davis received from James Petrillo, the “colorful, combative” president of the American Federation of Musicians, who volunteered to serve on Davis’s Council.²⁵ Before assuming the presidency of the AFM in 1940, the young Petrillo was something of a juvenile delinquent himself, perfecting strong-arm tactics that served him well when he led the Chicago musicians’ union in that city’s vibrant but sometimes violent labor movement.²⁶

¹⁸ “Music to Combat Juvenile Delinquency,” *Variety*, 12 September 1956, 47. Gary Marmorstein, in his monumental history of Columbia Records, suggests that Republican Senator Clare Boothe Luce “probably inveigled” Davis into launching the plan, but he does not cite his source for this claim, and we have found no other corroborating evidence. However, if it is true that Luce was involved and that her interest, as Marmorstein claims, was in combating rock ’n’ roll, she would have been sorely disappointed in the direction Davis took her inveigling, because the plan was clearly anti-juvenile delinquency, not anti-rock, and foresaw using rock ’n’ roll musicians as part of the effort rather than silencing them. Gary Marmorstein, *The Label: The Story of Columbia Records* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2007), 228.

¹⁹ “BMI, AFM Support for Davis’ JD Plan,” *Variety*, 17 October 1956, 57; Carl Haverlin, “Haverlin Says Sammy Davis Jr. Plan Puts No J.D. Stigma on Music Biz,” *Variety*, 24 October 1956, 56.

²⁰ “BMI Starts Kitty to Launch Davis Plan for Youth,” *Variety*, 10 October 1956, 52.

²¹ “Music to Combat Juvenile Delinquency.” For the coinage of “leerics,” see, for example, “‘Leerics’ Storm Hits Song World,” *Kalispell (MT) Inter Lake*, 3 April 1955, 20.

²² “Music to Combat Juvenile Delinquency.”

²³ “BMI, AFM Support for Davis’ JD Plan.”

²⁴ Harriet Wasser, “Likes Sammy Davis Jr. Idea; Disk Artists Have Big Influence on Kids,” *Variety*, 19 September 1956, 73.

²⁵ William Serrin, “James Petrillo Dead; Led Musicians,” *New York Times* (25 October 1984), 22.

²⁶ Robert Leiter, *The Musicians and Petrillo* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1953), 42.

Thus Petrillo's support of Davis's plan might suggest a faith in redeemability of the juvenile delinquent through music that, as we discuss below, Davis himself embodied to some extent. Petrillo's reputation had another consequence, however: By 1956, he was still loathed by record executives for, among other things, instigating two devastating musician strikes in the 1940s; Tim Anderson notes that these bans had significant negative impact on the recording industry, particularly the larger companies such as RCA and Columbia.²⁷ Therefore, the support of Petrillo and his union was likely to irritate and possibly help alienate the heads of the major labels.

Although it is difficult to imagine that Davis's campaign would have had much (or any) success in actually curbing delinquency, as an exercise in industry self-regulation and good corporate citizenship the plan was not as far-fetched as it might appear. Many industries and individual corporations produced public service announcements (PSAs) on various social issues. To give just one example, in 1955 the Westinghouse Broadcasting Company had partnered with the National Association for Mental Health on a campaign called "Sing Along for Mental Health,"²⁸ which one doctor described as "catchy tunes and clever thought-provoking lyrics [that] should be very helpful in introducing the concept of mental health to large numbers of people in a simple, wholesome, memorable way."²⁹ No less a luminary than Eleanor Roosevelt found the tunes "delightful" and praised the campaign saying, "Anything that is done to bring [mental health] to popular attention is of value."³⁰

The media industries in particular were well aware of the value of being regarded as good stewards of the culture. The comic book industry had adopted a content code just two years earlier, and although Hollywood's production code was beginning to break down around this time, the film and television industries continued to enforce severe content controls, not to mention the anticommunist blacklist. Even within the music business there had been several precedents for Davis's campaign, mostly on the local level, such as five radio stations in Houston that agreed in 1955 to stop playing certain records if requested by the local juvenile delinquency and crime commission.³¹ Presley himself was coming in for image retooling: As early as September 1956 movie moguls at Twentieth Century Fox were talking to Elvis's manager about re-creating "the rock 'n' roller into a influence for the good" with an "eye to the juvenile delinquency problem."³² Throughout the music industry, similar efforts would continue for several years, most notably a series of well-orchestrated campaigns against juvenile delinquency by the American Guild of Variety Artists during the period 1958–60, the highlight of which was the

²⁷ Tim Anderson, "'Buried under the Fecundity of His Own Creations': Reconsidering the Recording Bans of the American Federation of Musicians, 1942–44 and 1948," *American Music* 22/2 (Summer 2004): 231–69. Thanks to Leta Miller for calling our attention to Petrillo's special place in music history and its relevance to these events.

²⁸ "WBC Produces Six Jingles for AHF 'Get Out the Vote,'" *Broadcasting, Telecasting*, 1 October 1956, 24.

²⁹ Quoted in Eleanor Roosevelt, "My Day," 29 April 1955, <http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/>. See also "WBC Produces Six Jingles."

³⁰ Roosevelt, "My Day."

³¹ "Leerics' Storm Hits Song World."

³² "Halo, Everybody, Halo: Latest Presley Pitch," *Variety*, 26 September 1956, 1.

organization of outreach events featuring celebrities such as Louis Armstrong, Eddie Fisher, and Jackie Robinson speaking to teens about the importance of staying on the right side of the law.³³

Davis's anti-delinquency plan also showed a keen understanding of the workings of cultural policy at multiple levels; in particular, he understood that celebrity endorsements often carried greater weight than "official" state-sponsored policy. He was obviously not the first to recognize the value of putting social messages in the mouths of influential figures, but the plan does implicitly and astutely acknowledge the agency of the objects of policy (in this case, at-risk youth) and the ways in which they translate policy messages into action at the individual level. He also understood the kind of cooperative, industry-wide efforts that, in the absence of official state policy decreeing a cultural campaign against juvenile delinquency, would be required to realize such a plan.

Yet at the same time as Davis attempted to implement his plan, key music industry figures spoke out against it, undermining the kind of broad cooperation that Davis foresaw. In particular, they worried that his campaign actually implied a causal link between musical style and antisocial behavior. Most vocally, Goddard Lieberson, the "handsome, debonair" president of Columbia Records, feared that the plan "conveys the idea of a tacit admission that music, and pop music in particular, is connected with juvenile delinquency. I emphatically do not believe this to be the case. Perhaps it is true that juvenile delinquents do like certain types of pop music now extant, but I do not believe that music can contribute to juvenile delinquency."³⁴ Lieberson stopped short of rejecting Davis's plan completely, but he did chide Davis for announcing his plan in *Variety* instead of first taking it to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA); he also expressed his contempt for the plan by remarking that "a song entitled, 'Don't Be a Juvenile Delinquent,' is not going to stop juvenile delinquency any more than a song entitled 'Don't Have Cancer' is going to prevent cancer."³⁵ Although this skepticism was probably justified, Lieberson either missed or ignored Davis's point—namely, that popular public figures could influence their fans by throwing their fame behind a cause. In fact, Davis was merely recognizing one of the pillars of the advertising on which the media industries depended.

In a rebuttal to Lieberson, Davis argued instead for the importance of using music as a effective vehicle to communicate with youth. He stated, "Just as cancer is a physical problem to be treated with physical means, juvenile delinquency is a social problem that must be treated by social means. Music is of vital social importance to all teenagers, delinquent or otherwise. Having come into contact with the problem of juvenile delinquency personally, I know that the kids will

³³ See, for example, Victor Riesel, "Vaudeville Group Hopes to Combat Delinquency," *Portsmouth (OH) Times*, 6 December 1956, 34; "Entertainers Help Combat Delinquency," *Corpus Christi Times*, 14 January 1960, 10-B.

³⁴ "The Musical Businessman: Goddard Lieberson," *Time*, 16 March 1959, 92; Goddard Lieberson, "Lieberson Views on Sammy Davis Jr.'s Music Biz vs. Juvenile Delinquency," *Variety*, 10 October 1956, 52.

³⁵ Lieberson, "Lieberson Views."

listen to musical messages by their favorites.”³⁶ This response reflects in part Davis’s own approach to cultural policy, discussed below, in which he frequently used his own celebrity status to persuade at-risk youth to stay on the straight and narrow path. BMI’s Haverlin also rushed to Davis’s defense, refuting Lieberman’s claim that the campaign would stigmatize rock ’n’ roll by pointing out that if a baseball player spoke out against juvenile delinquency it would hardly stigmatize baseball.³⁷

Without backing from the RIAA or a majority of the major record labels, however, the required resources of production and distribution of these musical PSAs were out of Davis’s reach. Thus the specifics of the plan foundered primarily on opposition from Columbia and the RIAA, which claimed that such a campaign would require a revision of its constitution and anyway “fell outside the orbit of its functions.”³⁸ *Variety* heaped scorn on the RIAA’s recalcitrance and continued to insist—to no avail—that the real problem was the “farfetched” idea that the plan “might be construed as tantamount acquiescence that the record business is in some way responsible for j.d.”³⁹ Popular support did not come to the rescue either; although the mainstream press was largely quiet on the subject, the *Chicago Defender* scolded the African American community for failing to support Davis: “Harlemites went over to Sammy Davis, jr.’s [*sic*] cause in star’s program to battle juvenile delinquency UNTIL THE TIME CAME to put in dough.—THEN HARLEM returned to normal and merely sat by and praised the effort.”⁴⁰ Davis himself does not appear to have commented publicly on this defeat; not a man to remain daunted for long, he continued to work on a wide range of social causes and was in the thick of the Variety Artists’ Guild’s efforts to combat juvenile delinquency over the next several years.

So: case closed? Not quite. It is easy to end the story with the negative decision by the RIAA and reduce Davis’s failure to a single meeting by some uncooperative industry bigwigs. However, cultural policy is more complicated than that conclusion suggests, and by focusing a wider lens on this episode, we can hope to gain a subtler grasp of its workings. To better understand what happened to Davis’s 1956 attempt at policy making, we need to look at Davis’s persona as well as the industrial context of his plan’s reception.

Sammy Davis, Jr., as Actor and Narrator in History

To fully appreciate Davis’s efforts at cultural policy, it is helpful to consider his cultural position in Trouillot’s terms as both an actor in history and a narrator of his own historical actions. As Trouillot points out, many actions cannot be understood apart from the meaning given to them by the participants; to understand the past, then, we must take into account the way that historical events were put into discourse

³⁶ Sammy Davis, Jr., “Sammy Davis Jr. Replies to Lieberman on Plan to Stem Juvenile Delinquency,” *Variety*, 17 October 1956, 57.

³⁷ Haverlin, “Haverlin Says.”

³⁸ “RIAA Turns Down Sammy Davis Idea,” *Variety*, 7 November 1956, 41.

³⁹ “Sammy Davis Jr.’s Plan Still OK,” *Variety*, 7 November 1956, 41.

⁴⁰ Al Monroe, “So They Say,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, 24 October 1956, 7.

by participants at the time. Trouillot's best example is the worker on strike who only "really" strikes by narrating absence from work as a labor action. The actor in history and the narrator of history must be assessed together in order to make sense of historical events.⁴¹ Similarly, only by looking at both Davis as actor in history and Davis as narrator of history can we begin to understand the complexities of his social relevance. Our goal is emphatically not to use Davis's endlessly confessional self-documentation to psychoanalyze the man, but rather to recite what we can know about him to explain more fully how his anti-juvenile delinquency campaign came to be and why it failed.

For children growing up in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s (the authors included), Sammy Davis, Jr., was one of the most beloved entertainers in the country. He was Mr. Bojangles and Mr. Wonderful; above all, he was the Candy Man, a sweet, smiling singer familiar from countless talk show appearances and Jerry Lewis telethons. We knew he was once a dancer and a buddy of Frank Sinatra's, but both his unique talent and his cultural significance seemed simultaneously mysterious and irrelevant; like Paul Lynde or Charo, he was simply a fixture in the pantheon of contemporary celebrity, evoking fondness but not scrutiny, admiration but not necessarily appreciation.

Yet observers who think of Sammy Davis, Jr., only as the kindly Candy Man of his later career might be ignorant of his prodigious talent as a musician and entertainer, and might easily misunderstand the truth of Sammy Davis, Jr.'s place in U.S. politics and culture. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a personality who stood more centrally atop the fault lines of U.S. society or who more fully embodied its contradictions in the fifties, sixties, and seventies. Historian and African American Studies scholar Gerald Early, one of the few to attempt to unravel these contradictions, calls Davis's life a "complex parable about crossover success, racial self-hatred, and the early days of racial integration."⁴² Davis was an African American man who was embraced by both white and black Americans for his ability to cross the color line, yet also reviled by both for crossing it too fully and brazenly, such as when he married actress May Britt, a white woman, in 1960. He proudly identified with his racial heritage, yet remained hungry for white acceptance, "[fighting] hard against aspects of the black entertainment world that had nurtured him."⁴³ To make matters more difficult, he puzzled everyone and outraged many with his conversion to Judaism in 1954. Even his stage show traded in ethnic crossing: As a child he had performed in blackface (despite his own black skin),⁴⁴ and, by the mid-1950s, his stage act included long set pieces in which Davis impersonated both black and white popular performers of the day. Finally, and pertinently for this study, he was an immensely talented musician who came to prominence just as his musical style was being made obsolete by rock 'n' roll; like Nat "King" Cole, he was a black man who symbolized a "whiter"

⁴¹ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 24.

⁴² Gerald L. Early, "Sammy Davis Jr., Establishment Rebel," in *This Is Where I Came In: Black America in the 1960s* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 39.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁴ Frank Cullen, Florence Hackman, and Donald McNeilly, "Sammy Davis, Jr.," in *Vaudeville Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 298.

music. Critics often panned his performances; white audiences packed the house anyway.⁴⁵

In that sense, Davis was seen within the industry as something of a lightweight: highly gifted to be sure, but better at mimicry than at original art and more interested in pleasing audiences than in saying something new. This attitude was particularly acute in 1956 as critics dismissed Davis's feel-good Broadway hit *Mr. Wonderful*. As Brooks Atkinson wrote in the *New York Times*, "Mr. Wonderful' has no point of view aside from a conviction that night clubs and show business are glamorous. . . . This is a spectacular, noisy endorsement of mediocrity."⁴⁶ Such reviews, although usually praising Davis personally for his undeniable singing and dancing abilities, helped seal his reputation as a popular but unserious showman. This position was further complicated by Davis's race. Gerald Early claims that although Davis was a huge star during his lifetime, he is relatively forgotten in the contemporary United States and that this forgetting is symptomatic of a larger silence in contemporary America about the legacy of the black entertainer. In particular, Davis's reputation suffered from both a cultural and a personal history of black-embodied "racial stereotypes to please white audiences," especially during Jim Crow.⁴⁷

In his private life, Davis vacillated between highs of optimism, seeing his personal success as a testament to the individual's power to move beyond race and class in a meritocratic society, and depths of guilt, often expressed through his almost manic philanthropy. His commitment to political causes was especially strong, including countless initiatives to help black youth, and Early claims that Davis raised more money for the civil rights movement than virtually any other single individual.⁴⁸ He was willing to perform benefit concerts for almost anyone who asked. Such performances were rarely drop-ins; in fact, Davis often sang for two or three hours on the same evening that he had a paying gig on Broadway or in a club. In a representative week in 1956, Davis sang and danced through eight performances of *Mr. Wonderful*, performed at nine benefits, appeared on television on the *Steve Allen Show*, and gave several radio interviews, all the while maintaining a heroic schedule of partying and entertaining into the wee hours.⁴⁹ The *Chicago Defender* wondered how "this bit of nervous energy, answering to the name of Sammy Davis, Jr. . . . can do all of the things that he does and keep going without collapsing."⁵⁰ The answer was that he couldn't: He worked himself to the point of needing hospitalization for exhaustion after trying to balance his paying shows and legendary socializing with his benefit performances and other activities.⁵¹ Despite this activity and the enormous sums he raised, Davis was also roundly criticized throughout the 1960s for not doing enough for the civil rights movement, and when he chose to lend

⁴⁵ Wil Haygood, *In Black and White: The Life of Sammy Davis Jr.* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2003), 233–34.

⁴⁶ Brooks Atkinson, "Mr. Wonderful," *New York Times*, 23 March 1956, 23.

⁴⁷ Early, "Sammy Davis Jr.," 40.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁹ This information was taken from a question posed by Mike Wallace on his television show *Night Beat*, quoted in Davis, Boyar, and Boyar, *Yes I Can*, 379.

⁵⁰ Hazel Washington, "This . . . Is Hollywood," *Chicago Daily Defender*, 22 November 1958, 19.

⁵¹ Early, "Sammy Davis Jr.," 44–45.



Figures 2 and 3. Sammy Davis, Jr., frequently impersonated both white and black performers in his stage shows, a metaphor for his ability to cross racial barriers to some extent in real life, both personally and professionally. In these frames from a 1955 benefit performance for the March of Dimes, Davis imitates Edward G. Robinson (Figure 2) and Jerry Lewis (Figure 3). Photos courtesy of the March of Dimes.

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his support to Richard Nixon in the early 1970s, he was met with epithets of “race traitor” and worse.

Davis appears to have understood and evaluated his own life as a fulfillment of the American dream, and certainly narrated it that way. His autobiography *Yes I Can* answered a number of questions that he felt were directed at him, as an entertainer and a U.S. citizen, but also as a black man in the mid-twentieth century. The expression of personal success, of individual triumph, captured in the phrase “Yes I Can” is supported by Davis’s admission in a 1966 interview with Alex Haley that his first goal was to achieve fame and fortune, but also that he understood race as a personal struggle for acceptance, not as a social or systemic issue.⁵² In other words, making it as an entertainer was, for Davis, to move beyond his racial status as well as his poverty and obscurity. His former love interest Peggy King claimed that he “wanted to be white,” and his friend Cindy Bitterman stated that Davis did not think “of himself as a black person.”⁵³ Davis’s drive for success was tied to his idea that, as Early stated, “He would be judged purely and solely as an individual since his audiences could no longer situate him in a black context.”⁵⁴ It is in this regard, of course, that Davis’s subjectivity most forcefully conflicted with his status as a “black entertainer,” a socially constructed category over which Davis had little control, yet one that structurally positioned him as a particular kind of agent in history, who was relatively disempowered by racism and discrimination. “The worst thing in the world to be is a star and a Negro,” Davis once told an interviewer. “If I didn’t have this racial millstone around my neck, I could have made \$20 million by now.”⁵⁵

Davis famously straddled not just race, but also class. Although he was, again like Cole, a relatively safe and “dapper” black man with wide acceptance among whites, he was never entirely free of the danger of black working-class aberrance. He himself repeatedly harkened back to his hardscrabble roots, telling the story of a childhood friend who was killed after getting into unspecified trouble and saying that he “thanks Heaven” that show business had taken him away before he got into serious trouble himself.⁵⁶ He saw his past as the key to his credibility on the juvenile delinquency issue. For example, speaking at an anti-delinquency rally in Harlem led by the Police Athletic League, he told the crowd of 1,500 that he had once been a “cat” on a Harlem street corner, looking down on the “squares” in the League before he turned his life around.⁵⁷ Davis could thus simultaneously represent two separate-but-related cultural spheres: On the one hand, he was, as Bruce Tucker

⁵² Alex Haley, “Playboy Interview: Sammy Davis, Jr. (December 1966),” in *The Playboy Interviews*, ed. Murray Fisher (New York: Ballantine Books 1993), 212–61. Several readers of earlier versions of this essay have noted the similarity between the title of Davis’s autobiography and Barack Obama’s presidential campaign slogan “Yes We Can.” Although we have found no evidence that this similarity is anything more than an interesting coincidence, it is worth noting that both slogans speak to and from the experience of important social figures who sought to both transcend and heal the racial wounds of U.S. society.

⁵³ Both quoted in Haygood, *In Black and White*, 205.

⁵⁴ Early, “Sammy Davis Jr.,” 64.

⁵⁵ Quoted in George E. Pitts, “Rock ’n’ Roll Department,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 10 November 1956, A29.

⁵⁶ “Anti-Crime Rally Is Held in Harlem,” *New York Times*, 12 August 1956, 88.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

describes Sidney Poitier's character in the 1955 film *Blackboard Jungle*, the reformed or saved delinquent brought back from the brink of antisocial behavior into white middle-class norms;⁵⁸ on the other hand, he also represented white cultural authority itself, despite his black skin, as a black minstrel figure purveying "good" (read "white") pop music in the face of a rising tide of racially charged rock 'n' roll.

Applied to Davis's anti-juvenile delinquency plan, this tension between his subject position as actor in history and his agent position as black entertainer helps explain the rise and fall of his attempt to enact cultural policy. The "Don't Be a Juvenile Delinquent" campaign came about in part because of who Davis appears to have thought he was: a philanthropist and social activist who understood troubled youth of all races and the instrumental power of music to reach them. Furthermore, the plan was taken seriously in part because of who others thought he was: a credible and popular figure within the industry who understood both the music business and the teenagers who were perceived to be the source of the juvenile delinquency problem, and who himself, having some mobility across racial boundaries, had the standing and wide appeal to unite a diffused and divided music industry.

The Political-Economic Context: Industrial Battles over Rock 'n' Roll

If Davis was in many ways uniquely positioned, culturally and industrially, to pull off his campaign, and if similar efforts to organize cultural campaigns against various perceived social threats had succeeded before in other cultural industries and would succeed in the future in the music industry, why, then, did this particular campaign at this particular time go nowhere? To understand fully that turn of events, we must integrate our understanding of Davis as actor in and narrator of history with Davis as "Negro entertainer," that is, Davis as agent in history constrained by differences in social and cultural power. In short, we also need to look at the industrial context. Davis's campaign arrived in the middle of an ongoing war between the two major music-licensing agencies, the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) and Broadcast Music Inc. (BMI).⁵⁹ This longstanding rivalry was not merely economic but also—in some ways, especially—cultural, involving battles over musical aesthetic taste and the question of music's potential embodiment of moral values.

In terms of Davis's failed campaign, the most relevant events in this feud began in 1953 when the "Songwriters of America" filed an antitrust suit for \$150 million against BMI, NBC, CBS, ABC, Columbia Records, RCA Victor Records, and others. Songwriters of America, although not officially affiliated with ASCAP, represented composers and lyricists of art music and Broadway musicals, including Ira Gershwin, Gian Carlo Menotti, Samuel Barber, Virgil Thomson, Dorothy Fields, Arthur Schwartz, and Alan Jay Lerner, all of whom were also members of ASCAP. Additionally, ASCAP composers Richard Rodgers, Oscar

⁵⁸ Tucker, "Tell Tchaikovsky," 290–91.

⁵⁹ See John Ryan, *The Production of Culture in the Music Industry: The ASCAP-BMI Controversy* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985).

Hammerstein II, Cole Porter, and Irving Berlin were not officially party to the lawsuit but contributed to the plaintiffs' legal fund and were sympathetic to their position.⁶⁰ In *Schwartz v. BMI* the songwriters alleged that the broadcast networks, BMI (which was owned by the networks), and certain record companies had maintained "a conspiracy to dominate and control the market for the use and exploitation of musical compositions."⁶¹ The suit hinged on the accusation that the national networks had actively created a monopoly for "B.M.I. controlled music" on the airwaves while discriminating against the music composed by ASCAP members (such as the plaintiffs).⁶²

BMI, notably, controlled the lion's share of rock 'n' roll and R&B music at the time, and as the two sides each attempted to win the public relations battle, the lawsuit quickly turned into a fifteen-year war of "good" art and pop music versus "bad" rock 'n' roll and R&B music. BMI was sharply criticized for its connections to rock 'n' roll, which had led to "a shortage of good music."⁶³ Indeed, as Russell Sanjek pointed out in his account of this suit, the Songwriters of America deliberately sought to portray *Schwartz v. BMI* as a "struggle to restore the 'good music' that once had dominated radio programming . . . [which] had yielded to an invasion of rock-and-roll, with its 'definite tieup with juvenile delinquency."⁶⁴ A prime, scathing example was delivered by lyricist and producer Billy Rose, who blamed BMI for the "low level of our popular songs these days" and accused the agency of foisting upon the nation "rock 'n' roll and other musical monstrosities which are muddying up the airwaves . . . [,] obscene junk pretty much on a level with dirty comic magazines."⁶⁵ Rose ended his rant with perhaps the worst insult possible in the fall of 1956: "It is the current climate on radio and tv which makes Elvis Presley and his animal posturings possible."⁶⁶ (It is perhaps worth pointing out

⁶⁰ "Songsmiths Do Solo on \$150,000,000 Suit; Touch Off Music-Radio Discord," *Variety*, 11 November 1953, 1, 50.

⁶¹ Quoted in Val Adams, "Composers Sue for \$150,000,000; Allege Radio-TV-Record Monopoly," *New York Times*, 10 November 1953, 1.

⁶² Whether ASCAP or BMI had a monopoly on music royalties was the subject of much debate between the two organizations. Defending BMI against charges of a monopoly, Russell Sanjek argued that ASCAP still dominated the market and that even during *Schwartz vs. BMI*, ASCAP still received 85 percent of the royalties from television and 70 percent of all radio performances, about three times more than BMI. See Russell Sanjek, *From Print to Plastic: Publishing and Promoting America's Popular Music (1900-1980)*, Institute for Studies in American Music Monographs no. 20 (Brooklyn: Institute for Studies in American Music, 1983), 47. Sanjek, as a former employee of BMI, was clearly an interested observer, but his account is borne out by other evidence as well. For example, in May 1958, two years after the Celler hearings, the House Small Business Committee recommended an antitrust action *against* ASCAP, whose policies for royalty distribution allegedly "discriminated against small music publishers and 'other less powerful members of the society.'" "New Antitrust Action against ASCAP Urged," *Los Angeles Times*, 5 May 1958. For more on *Schwartz v. BMI* and its political and cultural context, see R. Serge Denisoff and William D. Romanowski, *Risky Business: Rock in Film* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1991), especially pp. 34-40.

⁶³ Martha Rountree, quoted in Werner Wiskari, "Rock 'n' Roll Said to Dominate Air," *New York Times*, 21 March 1958, 45. See also "Rock 'n' Roll Laid to B.M.I. Control," *New York Times*, 19 September 1956.

⁶⁴ Sanjek, *From Print to Plastic*, 45.

⁶⁵ Quoted in "ASCAP-BMI Feud Flares Up in Celler Monopoly Probe," *Broadcasting, Telecasting*, 24 September 1956, 33.

⁶⁶ Quoted *ibid.*

that the man complaining about the “low level of our popular songs” had himself given the world the highbrow musical masterpiece “Does the Spearmint Lose Its Flavor on the Bedpost Overnight?”) The songwriters also insinuated that BMI had communist leanings, describing a network proposal as the kind of offer “that the Russians would make in the United Nations” and using Cold War rhetoric such as “Our best musical talent [seems] to be having an easier time crashing through the Iron Curtain than through the electronic curtain which the broadcasting companies have set up.”⁶⁷

Carl Haverlin, the then-president of BMI who was so supportive of Davis’s plan, implied that this 1953 lawsuit was just another skirmish in the ongoing battle between ASCAP and BMI, and Sanjek agrees that the demonization of rock ’n’ roll was part of a deliberate legal strategy by one faction within the music industry to weaken another. Sanjek describes the allegations of the plaintiffs as boiling down to “(1) we never had rock-and-roll before BMI; (2) we never had juvenile delinquency before BMI; therefore, (3) remove BMI and you get rid of both.”⁶⁸ The composers of “good music,” who at best made only pro forma protestations that they were not acting on behalf of ASCAP, sought to exploit wider cultural fears of “bad music” such as rock ’n’ roll and the social breakdown with which it was linked “in hopes of arousing public opinion favorable to the progress of the lawsuit.”⁶⁹

In addition to playing out in the courts and in public opinion throughout the rest of the 1950s and most of the 1960s (the suit was finally dismissed in 1968), this struggle also occupied the time and energy of Congress. Of most immediate relevance for this study, in the fall of 1956—in the same week that Davis published his anti-delinquency proposal—BMI and rock ’n’ roll were coming in for a beating during antitrust hearings in the House of Representatives, led by Emanuel Celler, a Democratic Representative from Brooklyn. These hearings, described by *Variety* as “a preview in miniature of the evidence and counter evidence involved” in the songwriters’ lawsuit, included Rose and other songwriters, present and former ASCAP officials, and broadcasters including ABC president Robert Kittner.⁷⁰ BMI’s Haverlin came in for special grilling, forced to defend conspiratorial charges that BMI was using its relationship with the broadcasters to remove ASCAP music from the airwaves. He was questioned, for instance, about a newsletter plugging a BMI tune that warned broadcasters, “Look out for the reverse side—it is an ASCAP number,” as well as a BMI brochure that seemed to boast of its insider’s advantage over ASCAP when it came to airplay: “The public selects its favorites from the music which it hears and does not miss what it does not hear.”⁷¹ Celler made no secret of the fact that he was holding the hearings with an eye toward more restrictive regulation of the networks, especially in music licensing and the telefilm industry. He denounced the Federal Communications Commission’s 1941 Chain

⁶⁷ “Cleffers Nix Hanging on Webs’ Bit to ‘Divest’ if Suit Is Withdrawn,” *Variety*, 3 October 1956, 63; Billy Rose quoted in “ASCAP-BMI Feud,” 63.

⁶⁸ Sanjek, *From Print to Plastic*, 45.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁷⁰ “Celler Committee Hears ASCAP Blast vs. BMI and Broadcasters; Haverlin, under Solons’ Fire, Disputes Claims,” *Variety*, 19 September 1956, 71.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 81.

Broadcasting Rules, which sought to curb the power of NBC and CBS and which had forced NBC to sell off one of its radio networks, as dangerously outmoded (“horse-and-buggy regulations for an atomic era”).⁷² He also called for the divestiture of the networks from BMI, a threat real enough that CBS and NBC offered, soon afterward, to consider voluntary divestiture if the Songwriters of America dropped their lawsuit.⁷³

Although network power was Celler’s primary target, his complaints also included cultural broadsides against rock ’n’ roll; like Rose and the other songwriters, he railed against Elvis Presley for promoting juvenile delinquency and chastised BMI for lacking “good taste” in promoting their R&B and rock ’n’ roll catalogs.⁷⁴ Vance Packard (of *The Hidden Persuaders* fame), hired by the songwriters to give expert testimony on how U.S. musical taste was being “manipulated,” stated that rock ’n’ roll provoked “the animal instinct in modern teenagers” with its “raw, savage tone” and “nonsensical” and “lewd” lyrics.⁷⁵ Interestingly, among the industry powerbrokers who were deeply invested in the distinction between “good” pop and “bad” rock was the best man at Sammy Davis, Jr.’s wedding, Frank Sinatra. The week of the Celler hearings, Sinatra publicly denounced Mitch Miller, his artist and repertoire man at Columbia (which had an ownership interest in BMI through the Columbia Broadcasting System); the crooner claimed that Miller had fed him a steady diet of “mediocre” BMI songs to record, instead of allowing him to sing superior ASCAP material, thereby hurting Sinatra’s career and precipitating his departure from the label to record for Capitol. The facts did not appear to bear out Sinatra’s accusations: BMI’s Haverlin countered that only five of the fifty-seven songs that Sinatra had recorded for Columbia were licensed by BMI, whereas the rest were ASCAP; at the same time, ten of his forty-nine songs for Capitol were BMI, a significantly higher percentage.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, Sinatra was yet another powerful industry figure throwing his weight heavily behind ASCAP and the advocates of “good music.” Not coincidentally, he would help organize the Grammy Awards two years later as part of his own campaign to reassert the cultural authority of his generation of musicians.

Sammy Davis, Jr., vs. the Record Industry

When we bring these industrial squabbles back around to the case of Sammy Davis, Jr.’s plan to organize the music industry against juvenile delinquency, it is possible to see how the case illuminates the range of individual, institutional, and sociohistorical factors that must be considered in assessing cultural policy in U.S. music history. Following the Celler hearings, BMI and the networks were on notice

⁷² “Horse & Buggy’ Regulations Gotta Go, Celler Warns,” *Variety*, 19 September 1956, 45.

⁷³ “Celler Winds Probe with No Major Net Monopoly Findings, but Trouble Still Looming on D. of J. Front,” *Variety*, 3 October 1956, 32, 56.

⁷⁴ Sanjek, *From Print to Plastic*, 46.

⁷⁵ Quoted *ibid.*, 47.

⁷⁶ “Sinatra’s Bomb at Antitrust Probe: BMI Explosion or ASCAP Backfire?” *Variety*, 26 September 1956, 1, 44; “Columbia Cites Records in Challenging Sinatra,” *Broadcasting, Telecasting*, 24 September 1956, 7.

that at least one powerful, anti-network, anti-rock congressman was vigorously seeking to weaken their positions in the industry. BMI in particular followed up with a strong public relations campaign: Believing that the tide of public and regulatory opinion was turning in favor of ASCAP, Haverlin sought to heighten the reputation and competitive value of BMI in the public sphere by going on the offensive.⁷⁷ In light of that strategy, it seems likely that BMI saw Davis's plan as a unique opportunity to stave off criticism of their stable of artists, support their contention that rock 'n' roll did not cause juvenile delinquency, and shore up their standing as a socially responsible company. Although internal documents that might have shed further light on Haverlin's thinking seem to have disappeared, the vigorous financial, organizational, and rhetorical support that BMI gave to Davis is fully compatible with the agency's other strategies to protect its business. Furthermore, this interpretation of BMI's actions is also in keeping with BMI's prior history of self-policing its artists; a year earlier it had promised to clamp down on suggestive lyrics.⁷⁸ Similarly, RCA also backed Davis's proposal; as both Elvis Presley's label and corporate parent of public-interest licensee NBC, the firm had every reason to appear to be practicing good corporate citizenship, give Presley some much-needed good publicity, and show that rock 'n' roll could be a weapon against (rather than a cause of) juvenile delinquency. Those elements of the industry that supported Davis, in other words, tended to be linked to rock music and could use the anti-delinquency campaign to shore up their reputations; the same policy that Davis, as an individual historical actor, wished to implement in the public interest resonated with what some industry figures saw as an answer to their political-economic needs.

Columbia Records, in contrast, balked at the plan. As a co-defendant in *Schwartz v. BMI* and, like RCA, attached to a broadcast network (CBS), Columbia was wary of giving the Songwriters of America further fodder for their anti-rock publicity campaign—hence Goddard Lieberson's aforementioned fear that the plan constituted a “tacit admission that music, and pop music in particular, is connected with juvenile delinquency.” Equally importantly, however, was that Columbia had little stake in rock music at the time; even while Lieberson was publicly denying that rock 'n' roll was in any way connected to delinquency, he himself was adamantly opposed to the genre, refusing to involve Columbia in what he considered an “undesirable fad” until millions of dollars in sales had been missed.⁷⁹ Although Columbia did release Little Richard and other R&B artists through its Okeh subsidiary, its real strength was in classical, Tin Pan Alley, and Broadway—genres that continued to be dominated by ASCAP. Many of the company's most important artists, in fact, were deeply, publicly invested in perpetuating the association of rock 'n' roll music with juvenile delinquency and had little interest in refuting that association by supporting a plan to have rockers such as Presley cut anti-delinquency jingles. This awkward position—Columbia was effectively being sued, indirectly, by its own

⁷⁷ “P. R. Push by BMI,” *Broadcasting, Telecasting*, 10 October 1956, 5.

⁷⁸ “Leerics' Storm Hits Song World.”

⁷⁹ “The Musical Businessman.”

stable of artists even as it counted on those artists for record sales—helps explain Lieberon's ambivalence and his desire to let the RIAA as a body make the decision on whether or not to work with Sammy Davis, Jr.

These industrial calculations must be further augmented by an appreciation of the cultural dynamics involving Davis as a public figure and as an employee in the industry. Part of the reason for the plan's failure, despite Davis's ability to cross racial lines and speak credibly on the issue, was that his agent-position as "Negro entertainer"—as well as his industrial persona as a critically suspect, hyperkinetic do-gooder—did not have the status to command the approval of the industry's most powerful figures. Indeed, in the highly charged racial climate of the time, the clash between the upstart black employee Davis and the record executives whose backing he needed could be all too easily reimagined as the slave lecturing the master on morality. This observation is not to claim racist intent on the part of record executives, but rather to grapple realistically with the intersection of class and racial hierarchies within the industry and the culture at large in the United States of the mid-1950s. For example, it is telling that Lieberon publicly scolded Davis for not bringing his campaign to the higher-ups in the music business before publicizing it in *Variety*: "I do think that all of this should more properly have been brought to the Record Industry Association of America for consideration at a future board meeting."⁸⁰ Davis, Lieberon implied, should have respected institutional structures of authority and asked permission rather than speaking out of line, a clear reassertion of hierarchy that, in 1956, cannot be separated from the racialized lines of power in the music industry in which African American artists were routinely marginalized, swindled out of royalties, cheated out of songwriting credits, and subjected to myriad other abuses. (It is worth pointing out that the only Broadway show during the fall of 1956 that had an integrated chorus line was Davis's own show, *Mr. Wonderful*.)⁸¹ Nor could it be separated from the racialized lines of power in U.S. society more generally, where even stars like Davis and Nat "King" Cole continually faced the threat of racist assault, as well as more commonplace forms of discrimination such as being refused service at hotels and restaurants.⁸² It is equally telling that Sinatra, a white figure with significantly more clout than Davis, did succeed in his industry-reform projects such as the Grammys, whereas Davis's later success with his anti-delinquency campaign came at the guild level where power was distributed more horizontally and personal relationships counted for much more.

Conclusion

The irony of Davis's failure to win the consent of the white-dominated music industry, of course, was that his campaign was not about cleaning up the streets,

⁸⁰ Goddard Lieberon, "Lieberon Views on Sammy Davis Jr.'s Music Biz vs. Juvenile Delinquency," *Variety*, 10 October 1956, 52.

⁸¹ Izzy Rowe, "Fight Looms for Integration of Chorus Girls," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 10 November 1956, A28.

⁸² See, for example, Izzy Rowe, "Izzy Rowe's Notebook," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 1 December 1956, B20.

putting cops on the beat, or encouraging at-risk youth to become involved in athletics (although Davis certainly participated in his share of such activities), but rather about instituting cultural policy to reassert white cultural authority in the face of the racialized musical genre of rock 'n' roll. His methods and the spokespeople he had in mind were selected to appeal to white middle-class youth: To the extent that Elvis Presley singing jingles on the theme of "Don't be a juvenile delinquent" could be expected to accomplish anything, it would perhaps consist of containing the destructive impulses of his fans, who were overwhelmingly white and middle class.⁸³

The failure of Sammy Davis, Jr.'s battle against juvenile delinquency has, it might appear, a simple political-economic explanation. It came at exactly the wrong time, getting caught in the crossfire of not just cultural anxiety over a possible causal relationship between rock 'n' roll music and juvenile delinquency, but also of an internecine struggle within the music business that attempted to use a moral panic over rock and delinquency in its industrial economic and political maneuvers. Different players in the industry had staked their business strategies on different inflections of the rock-delinquency association, making the possible link between popular music and juvenile delinquency volatile and politically potent, and thus rendering difficult any coordinated action. However, such political-economic explanations of policy formation require supplementation, a framework that can also assess and integrate cultural factors that better account for individual agency and the role of discourse in making sense of the activities of historical actors. One cannot fully grasp the case of Sammy Davis, Jr., vs. juvenile delinquency without considering the tension between Davis's individual position within the industry and his unique persona, goals, and self-understanding. Drawing on poststructuralist historiography and political economy illuminates more fully the dynamics of policy formation as exemplified by this small, seemingly insignificant episode. Far from being unimportant, however, this case illustrates how hierarchies of aesthetic taste complicate the relationship between music as the instrument of cultural policy, which was Davis's vision, and music as the target of cultural policy, which was the dominant theme of the immediate social context. The ultimate incompatibility of these two modalities of music became an insoluble contradiction for Davis and his efforts at social reform.

Davis's campaign represents one way station along the path that Bruce Tucker identified, the discursive shift that changed the meaning of rock 'n' roll from a socially destructive racial threat to a generational barrier to understanding. It was, of course, a minor incident in that transformation, but the imagery of an African American performer attempting to unite Irving Berlin and Elvis Presley in policy

⁸³ William Graebner describes how two postwar programs in Buffalo, New York, designed and sold as campaigns to curb juvenile delinquency among Buffalo's white youth, were not about "eliminating hard-core juvenile delinquency" but rather about efforts to contain the "disease of delinquency from spreading to the white middle class." Rather than being a cure for juvenile delinquency, youth programs like Hi-Teen and Dress Right were "preventative medicine" that sought to keep white middle-class teens from being corrupted or tempted by the classed and racialized delinquent Other. See William Graebner, "The 'Containment' of Juvenile Delinquency: Social Engineering and American Youth Culture in the Postwar Era," *American Studies* 27/1 (1986): 94–95.

work—that is, to use both “good” pop and “bad” rock ’n’ roll to shore up white cultural authority—signaled a different conception of the threat that teens and their culture represented to the nation than the oversimplified “rock = delinquency” idea that gripped so much of the country at the time. The fact that *Schwartz v. BMI* pitted Berlin against Presley, and made the possible rock-delinquency linkage central to intra-industry legal strategies, does not alter the racial semiotics of black pop performer Davis attempting to transcend racial difference to appeal to (primarily white) youth generationally.

This study also reveals one of the many casualties of the internal war within the music business itself. The aesthetic and moral discourses of “good” and “bad” music, which were advanced as part of the Songwriters of America suit, so fully transcended taste and became so thoroughly intertwined with the battle over economic interests and cultural authority that, when collective policy action may have been called for, the music industry was paralyzed. This paralysis suggests a complex interplay of culture and political economy, as well as some of the complexities of cultural policy formation. The shape and direction of cultural policies, including industry action of the kind that did not happen here, cannot be understood outside of the complicated, multilayered network of social relations within which individuals operate as actors of, agents in, and narrators of history. This perspective contrasts sharply with more traditional approaches that view cultural policy as a top-down process derived from the actions of legal and regulatory authorities.

Sammy Davis, Jr., vigorously pursued cultural policies in society at large, using his talent and fame to try to intervene culturally against a range of social ills; the problem came when he attempted to translate this kind of individual micropolicy into institutional, industrial cultural policy. As some in the industry recognized, Davis’s plan might have made sense for the industry as a whole, but policy decisions cannot be reduced to logical calculations outside the social relations of the policy makers, especially unofficial policy makers without the backing of state power. Davis’s own racial and cultural position in society and his structural position within the industry were such that record executives such as Lieberson and others in the RIAA saw his plan not as the well-meaning, socially responsible effort that Davis intended, but as a challenge to their own status as captains of their industry and their carefully cultivated self-image as good, trustworthy stewards of U.S. culture. In that sense, allowing Davis’s plan to succeed, at that particular moment in American music history, would have represented to them a greater attack on the workings of white cultural authority than even rock ’n’ roll itself.

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