

“The Hardest Button to Button” — A Critical Analysis of Jack White and the White Stripes

by

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for the degree of Master of Arts

at

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DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

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## **Abstract**

Since their original formation in the summer of 1997, Detroit rock duo, the White Stripes have occupied a formidable and well-publicized position within the context of American music. Despite this accomplished status, the majority of discourse surrounding the White Stripes has tended toward sensationalized fandom or immediate and callous dismissal, with little investigation as to how the duo have been so polarizing. Recognizing a key analytical void in such a treatment of the duo, this thesis examines the White Stripes with the tools of postmodern thought, considering their artful use of kitsch and sincerity in their image, musical language, and aesthetic. In so doing, it offers much-needed insight into the band's widespread appeal as a blues revival band at the end of the rock era.

## Acknowledgements

The road to completing this thesis has been a challenging one, and there are several people who have helped contribute to its eventual success. Though I cannot possibly mention all those who have inspired, encouraged, or supported me along the way, I would like to acknowledge those people who have been most prominent and steadfast in my life over the course of this musicological journey.

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Finally, it would be remiss of me not to mention all the incredible friends and colleagues who have helped get me through this project as well. To my fellow MA-Musicology students (John, Alex, Carolyn, Ryan, and Ryan), my bandmates in Alright Gents (Mason and Derek), and all the people who have stuck with me since my days at Augustana (Nathan, Russ, Julia, Calvin, and Adam), thank you for being there — I could not have done this without you. Also, a special thank you to my girlfriend of four years, Leanna Trefry. With the combination of patience, encouragement, and love that she has shown me over the course of this project, there is no one person who has done more for my development as both a writer and as a person.



## Chapter 1: Introduction

My musicological interest in the White Stripes began as part of a small-scale research project in the final year of my undergraduate degree. Having been introduced to the White Stripes' music just a few years prior (in addition to attending a concert from the duo's 2007 Canadian tour), my knowledge of the band was in no way more advanced than that of any other casual listener — I knew there were only two members in the band, I knew they liked to dress in red and white, and I knew that their song, "Seven Nation Army" had a riff which sounded like a bass but was actually played on guitar. Beyond all this, what ultimately drew me to the White Stripes from an academic perspective was the immense energy the duo presented in their concerts, in addition to the eclectic mix of blues, punk, and various other influences exhibited throughout their recordings.

In its earliest stages, the proposal for my MA thesis was focused mainly on the White Stripes' peculiar relationship to the blues and American folk music. Arising from an inability to label the duo as a strict, traditional blues act, one of the primary goals for my research has been determining how the White Stripes have been able to get away with playing a Son House cover at one moment and a song driven by piano, bagpipes, or marimba the next. Especially early on in this process, such a blatant intermingling of genre convention seemed not only to be an indication of how the White Stripes had set themselves apart within a mainstream oriented toward homogenous marketability, but also a practice in direct conflict with the values of "truth" and "authenticity" the band had espoused since their formation in the late 1990s.

As a general rule, my research practice for this project has revolved around the close examination of the White Stripes' image and artistic output. Through my immersion in a near-countless amount of interviews, articles, and concert footage from the band, I have supplemented my familiarity with the White Stripes' recorded catalogue with an intimate understanding of how the duo has operated on both a personal and ideological level. In a manner quite similar to other *single-artist* monographs by scholars such as Lloyd Whitesell (Joni Mitchell), Susan Fast (Led Zeppelin), and Chris McDonald (Rush), the research presented in this thesis is aimed at producing an engaging and multi-faceted analysis of the White Stripes' artistic practices, in addition to explaining their position within a more broad and culturally relevant rock music tradition. Although this thesis also brings discourse on the White Stripes into an unprecedentedly academic setting, its application of numerous analytical frameworks — including performance studies, postmodern theory, and traditional notated analysis — also demonstrates an awareness of the inherent breadth and diversity involved in the burgeoning field of popular music studies.

For the most part, the themes driving my early vision for this thesis have been represented in the final product as well. While my preoccupation with the White Stripes' schizophrenic genre framework has been transformed into an analysis of the band's unique appropriation of the blues, the focus of my first chapter remains squarely on the issue of whether or not the White Stripes' music and identity are as “authentic” as one might believe. To accomplish this task, I begin with a critical analysis of the ways in which the White Stripes have borrowed from traditional blues convention, in addition to

outlining Jack White's own personal belief in the genre's embodiment of pure "musical truth." After showing how this perspective shares similarities with those of other blues-based rock artists such as Eric Clapton, I attempt to complicate matters by addressing the less typical ways in which White has aimed to portray and legitimize his position as a white blues performer in the twenty-first century. Finally, using a number of analytical frameworks to engage with this portrayal (including Philip Auslander's performance theory, Benjamin Filene's re-envisioning of American folk music, and Jean Baudrillard's writings on simulacra), I arrive at a conclusion about the White Stripes' authenticity which is considerably more refined and in-depth than anything found in the various media coverage surrounding the band.

My second chapter represents a branch of analysis that is relatively recent to my thinking about the White Stripes. Deriving from public criticism White has faced for his alleged promotion of misogynistic ideology, this section has the goal of examining the various representations of anti-feminist behaviour apparent in the White Stripes' image and musical aesthetic. Beginning with a framework which goes intentionally beyond the scope of a face-value lyrical analysis, this process not only involves the dissection of Jack White's checkered history with female musicians (Meg White included), but also casts his construction of the White Stripes' creative/performative hierarchy as an outgrowth of what Stephanie Coontz describes as the 19th-century "cult of domesticity".

Having spent my two previous sections on issues of an admittedly more sociological nature, I devote the third and final chapter of this thesis to the specifically musical reflection of how such concepts can be observed in the performances and

recordings of the White Stripes' oeuvre. By tying these aforementioned issues into a specifically musicological setting, my evaluation of the White Stripes takes on a noticeably more grounded tone, while also representing the multi-faceted nature of the band's complex artistic identity. With the knowledge that the issues addressed in this thesis are only a sampling of the most intriguing aspects surrounding the duo, it is my goal for this project to provide insight on some of the myriad questions I was left with upon first being introduced to the White Stripes all those years ago.

## Chapter 2: "It's a Fact That I'm the Seventh Son" — The White Stripes, Authenticity, and the Construction of the Postmodern Bluesman

"Are the White Stripes a blues band or just a sham?"<sup>1</sup> Though often expressed in ways not nearly so concise, this is the basic question that fans, critics, and music journalists have been asking about the White Stripes since the band's first appearance in July of 1997. For Slate journalist, Mark Jenkins, the inclination to label the White Stripes as a so-called "blues, roots, or back-to-basics act" is hardly unjustified.<sup>2</sup> After all, over the course of their fourteen-year career, the Stripes have not only "covered Robert Johnson, Blind Willie McTell, and [a host of] other blues venerables", but they have also taken considerable measures to present their own music "as if it comes from a newly discovered cache of vintage 78s".<sup>3</sup> Aside from their decidedly old-fashioned taste in cover songs, one of the most obvious factors linking the White Stripes to the generic category of "blues" is frontman Jack White's frequent championing of the genre as an inimitably authentic mode of musical expression. Reading much like a would-be mission statement for his entire musical career thus far, White's musings on the importance of his Delta Blues predecessors offer valuable insight as to how the White Stripes' musical aesthetic has come to function in such a distinctive way:

"When you're digging deeper into rock and roll, you're on a freight train headed straight for the blues — [...] the 1930s, really scary version of the blues.[...] There's a tension in that music that you

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Jenkins, "White Lies - Are the White Stripes a Blues Band or Just a Sham?" *Slate*, April 24, 2003, [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/music\\_box/2003/04/white\\_lies.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/music_box/2003/04/white_lies.html) (accessed April, 16 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

can feel. It just feels like there's this place where my soul rests, and those guys were expressing it."<sup>4</sup>

"It's just so truthful. It is the truth to me — musical truth. It's broken down to the simplest component. The romance of it, too, the timing of it — the recording technology of the time, and the fact that they even bothered to record it — is just so perfect. It's like the frame around the picture."<sup>5</sup>

"At times, we almost ignore our own music. If [the White Stripes] have the stage, we've gotta play Son House's music, because there's nobody else to keep it alive."<sup>6</sup>

Despite the similarity of White's musical outlook to a number of other mainstream blues-based artists, there is much about the White Stripes' image and aesthetic that makes it impossible to label them as a "strict blues-revival act."<sup>7</sup> Be it their regular flirtation with a number of seemingly incongruous musical genres — i.e. Celtic, Punk, and Country/Western — or perhaps their more general aversion to the trappings of blues purism espoused by artists such as John Mayall and Eric Clapton, something about the way the White Stripes have constructed their musical identity sets both their vision and appropriation of the blues tradition decidedly apart. Embracing this paradox as a primary focus for this chapter, my goal for the discussion below is to examine how the White Stripes have specifically adapted the blues to suit the needs of their own artistic vision,

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<sup>4</sup> Jimmy Page, The Edge, and Jack White, *It Might Get Loud*, DVD, directed by Davis Guggenheim (USA: Sony Pictures Classics, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Barney Hoskyns, "The Backpages Interview: Jack White," *Rock's Backpages*, November 2009, <http://www.rocksbackpages.com> (accessed November 20, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Perry, "What's Eating Jack?" *Observer*, November 14, 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2004/nov/14/popandrock.thewhitestripes> (accessed March 8, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Mark Jenkins, "White Lies - Are the White Stripes a Blues Band or Just a Sham?" *Slate*, April 24, 2003, [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/music\\_box/2003/04/white\\_lies.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/music_box/2003/04/white_lies.html) (accessed April, 16 2013).

while also considering the implications this adaptation might have upon traditional conceptions of identity and authenticity in rock and blues music.

***"Don't Ask Me Nothin' About Nothin' (I Might Just Tell You The Truth...)"***

Looking specifically at the language White has used to describe artists such as Son House and Robert Johnson, it is clear that his most powerful attraction to the Delta Blues tradition comes from its long-standing association with musical authenticity. Built on a decades-old cultural trope which has seen numerous entertainers cast as "primitive voices [of] the dark and demonic Delta", one of the most compelling aspects of blues authenticity is that it is often judged not only on the criterion of race, but also the amount of struggle or personal suffering a performer has endured over the course of his or her lifetime.<sup>8</sup> According to blues historian, Elijah Wald, the envisioning of Delta blues artists as the struggling "purveyors of a wild, soulful folk art" is largely the result of a backward-looking value system in which "poverty, rural roots, and a lack of musical training" are regarded as necessary pre-requisites for a meaningful or "authentic" blues experience.<sup>9</sup> Though much of Wald's research aims to refute this simplistic way of thinking about the blues, I would argue that such a basic and romanticized understanding of the genre might actually be useful in understanding Jack White's own (and strikingly similar) cultivation of musical authenticity.

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<sup>8</sup> Elijah Wald, "What Is Blues?" in *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Elijah Wald, "Introduction" in *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), xiii.

In his landmark article "Musical Personae", Philip Auslander presents a useful framework for examining how popular music identities have historically been formed and evaluated. Emphasizing the inherent performativity and intertextuality of these identities, Auslander suggests that one of the most important qualities of any musical persona is its potential to surpass "the written work" as a primary source for the collection and interpretation of artistic meaning:

“[...]it does not necessarily follow that simply because the verb ‘to perform’ demands a direct object, that the object of performance must be a text such as choreography, a dramatic script, or a musical work. Many other things can be understood as performative constructs: personal identity may be seen as something one performs, for instance. One can speak of performing a self in daily life just as readily as one speaks of performing a text in a theatre or concert hall. In short, the direct object of the verb to perform need not be something — it can also be someone, an identity rather than a text.”<sup>10</sup>

Auslander's roots in the field of performance studies serve him well throughout the article, as he presents a clever and nuanced argument for a shift in analytical focus from the written text to that of a performed artistic identity. Building on the previous musicological efforts of Nicholas Cook, Auslander clearly regards musical performance as an "irreducibly social phenomenon", yet does so in a way that is considerably more broad and empowering to the performer than a scholar such as Cook might have otherwise suggested.<sup>11</sup> Whereas Cook's understanding of a so-called "social" performance refers mainly to the interactions between performers as directed by a score or written text,

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<sup>10</sup> Philip Auslander "Musical Personae" *The Drama Review* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 101.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.



Auslander's claim that "to be a musician is to perform an identity in a social realm" places a far greater emphasis on a performer's own creative agency, while allowing the analysis of a specific musical entity (i.e. the White Stripes' recorded catalogue) to be informed by the crucial element of extra-musical context.<sup>12</sup>

One of the central pillars supporting Auslander's vision of performed musical identity is David Graver's concept of "personage".<sup>13</sup> Referring specifically to the difference in presence between an actor's publicly visible person and the character he portrays on stage, Graver's framework insists that a performer's personage "is not the real person behind [...] the character [...] but simply another way of representing oneself [...] within a particular discursive domain."<sup>14</sup> As Auslander is quick point out, the fact that "musicians do not usually portray fictional characters" on stage means that Graver's concept may require a slight amount of tweaking before it can be applied to the non-theatrical strictures of a "traditional" musical performance. However, if we believe as Auslander does "that when we see a musician perform, we are not simply seeing the 'real person' playing", but rather "a version of that person constructed for the specific purpose of playing music under particular circumstances" (a condition which is certainly applicable to Jack White), it becomes a great deal easier to understand how a musician's own identity could constitute an even more meaningful performance than that of his entire musical repertoire.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> David Graver, "The Actor's Bodies," in *Critical Concepts: Performance*, ed. Philip Auslander (London: Routledge, 2003), 157-74, quoted in Philip Auslander "Musical Personae" *The Drama Review* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 101.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

***“Take Apart Your Bones And Put ‘em Back Together...”***

Not unlike the mythical bluesmen to whom he owes much of his trademark swagger and enthusiasm, the appeal of Jack White’s over-the-top artistic persona derives primarily from the intermingling of a number of carefully-selected character traits — or as famed sociologist, Erving Goffman would refer to them: “fronts”.<sup>15</sup> A crucial precursor to Auslander’s theory on performed musical personae, Goffman identifies fronts as “the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by [an] individual during his performance”.<sup>16</sup> As Auslander takes care to explain in his own discussion, this expressive equipment is typically separated into two distinct categories — “‘setting’ (the physical context of the performance) and ‘personal fronts’ in which are included the performer’s ‘appearance’ and manner”.<sup>17</sup> Viewed through the lens of Goffman’s later work with frame theory (i.e. the system of signifiers through which lived experience becomes “intelligible”), the fronts at play within a given performance — be it musical or otherwise — are collectively responsible for the impression that a performer leaves on his or her audience. Though Auslander ultimately argues that a musician’s performance is best regarded as a *primary social frame* — that is, a sonic event which by nature of its man-made origin and conformity to social convention is recognized as musical — I would suggest that a slightly more flexible classification is needed to

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<sup>15</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), quoted in Philip Auslander “Musical Personae” *The Drama Review* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 109.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

understand the true scope and multi-faceted nature of Jack White's performed musical identity.<sup>18</sup>

In the context of Auslander's persona/real-life schema, one of the notable characteristics setting White apart from other contemporary musicians is the fact that he has made it incredibly difficult to tell where the "performed" Jack White ends and the "real" Jack White begins. Of course, judging by White's aforementioned affinity for the mystique and mythology of the Delta Blues, this obscurity and exaggeration of his personal identity — one of the most basic and underlying "fronts" comprising White's musical persona — is something which seems to have been completely and utterly intentional. A fascinating scene from Davis Guggenheim's 2009 documentary, *It Might Get Loud*, supports this suspicion, as White describes how his first exposure to the blues — an LP recording of Son House's *a cappella* number, "Grinnin' in Your Face" — led to a dramatic change in musical perspective that would stick with him well into his own mainstream career:

"By the time I was about eighteen, somebody played me Son House, and that was it for me. This [music] spoke to me in a thousand different ways. I didn't know that you could do that. It was just singing and clapping! And it meant everything — it meant everything about Rock and Roll, everything about expression, creativity, and art. One man against the world, and one song!

[After Son House], I heard everything disappearing. It didn't matter that he was clapping off-time. It didn't matter that there was no instrument being played. All that mattered was the attitude

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<sup>18</sup> Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay On the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1974), quoted in Philip Auslander "Musical Personae" *The Drama Review* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 104.

of the song. I thought about it for a long time — for days. [...] This whole new world [had] just opened up in front of me, and I [had] to figure out ‘How do I get there?’ [...] ‘Am I not allowed to get there?’

I started to look for ways to get away with it and not be some sort of white-boy blues band. [...] The White Stripes became [that] way to get away with it — by having a brother-and-sister band, where red-white-and-black was the complete aesthetic. It was childish, and we presented ourselves in a really childish manner — almost like cartoon characters. A lot of distractions to keep people away from what was really going on, which was we were just really trying to play [the blues]!”<sup>19</sup>

Apart from reaffirming his faith in the beauty and power of simplicity — a value that had also been instilled in him during his years as an apprenticing upholsterer — one of the greatest lessons White seems to have taken from the Delta Blues is the knowledge of how an epic (if somewhat fabricated) personal backstory can often make the difference between a career of marginalized obscurity and one of widespread cultural notoriety. While White may claim that his decision to mask the White Stripes in a such a distinctly “childish” and “cartoonish” manner came from a desire to avoid the usual criticisms faced by a young, white artist attempting to play the blues, I would also point out that the color-coded, “truth-telling” image White has embodied over the past decade-and-a-half bears a striking similarity to the type of deliberate identity-bending artists would undergo as part of what Benjamin Filene calls “the cult of authenticity”. Particularly in comparison to the way that folk enthusiasts shaped the identities of blues artists such as Lead Belly in the 1930s, White’s ability to style himself beyond the factual details of his

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<sup>19</sup> Jimmy Page, The Edge, and Jack White, *It Might Get Loud*, DVD, directed by Davis Guggenheim (USA: Sony Pictures Classics, 2009).

previous life as John Anthony Gillis provides a truly compelling backdrop for his own attempt at playing a new and meaningful version of the blues.

***“God-fearin’ People, Simple And Real...”***

According to Filene’s retelling, the beginnings of the “cult of authenticity” had roots in a relatively unsuccessful lecture tour by John Lomax and his two sons, Alan and John Jr..<sup>20</sup> Having originally set out in 1932 on a cross-country promotion for his recently re-printed book, *Cowboy Songs* — a venture ultimately marred by disappointing sales and growing familial tensions — what the Lomax family actually ended up establishing, says Filene, was a method of music appreciation that would “promote not just the songs they gathered but [also] the singers who sang them.”<sup>21</sup> Adopting such a novel philosophy over the course of their subsequent tours meant the Lomaxes needed to find and enlist the services of a number of “living vernacular musicians” who could convincingly lend support to their nostalgic view of America’s indigenous musical past.<sup>22</sup> When the family finally received sufficient funding from both the Library of Congress and the American Council of Learned Societies in 1933, one of the first people they collected under this new performer-centric criteria was an African-American convict by the name of Huddie William Ledbetter. Beyond representing one of the earliest major finds for the Lomax research team, what Ledbetter (better known as Lead Belly) ultimately provided for the

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<sup>20</sup> Benjamin Filene, “Creating the Cult of Authenticity: The Lomaxes and Leadbelly,” in *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 47.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 49.

eager folk collectors was a model as to what a “‘true’ folk singer looked and sounded like”.<sup>23</sup> As Filene goes on to explain, this newly-established benchmark for both musical and image-related authenticity inspired “a thicket of expectations and valuations that American roots musicians and their audiences have been negotiating ever since.”<sup>24</sup>

To utilize concepts from both Auslander’s and Graver’s work, what made Lead Belly so invaluable to the Lomaxes’ cause was the seemingly natural sense of power and “otherness” that was evoked by his “real-life” musical persona. Having spent a number of years in Louisiana’s Angola prison on charges of murder, Lead Belly’s “confinement [...] both from the phonograph and from the radio” was thought not only to have rooted his music and performance style in an incorruptible version of the “pre-commercial past”, but also to have laid the framework for the air of exoticism thrust upon him during the Lomaxes’ promotion to a number of curious and primarily white audiences.<sup>25</sup> As Filene explains, one of the key contributing factors (i.e. fronts) to the Lomaxes’ treatment of Lead Belly was their liberal manipulation of his image both in performance and in the various print media surrounding his work. Unpleasant as it is, this representation often took great pains to conceal what one might reasonably call the “real” Leadbelly — a “soft voiced, meticulously dressed” man who was “wonderful with children” and loved all kinds of music — and replaced it with a crude, primitivist approximation designed to “shock[...] hearers into attention.”<sup>26</sup> If this exaggerated image was not epitomized in a

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 59-61.

photo from the Lomaxes' 1936 biography, *Negro Folk Songs As Sung By Lead Belly* — in which Ledbetter sits barefoot atop a pile of canvas sacks wearing nothing but overalls and a bandana tied around his neck — the “authentic” Lead Belly persona was even further solidified through a number of sensational newspaper headlines and letters that Lomax had written to sell northern audiences on his newest coming attraction:

*(From a letter prior to Lomax's 1935 trip to New York)*

“Leadbelly is a nigger to the core of his being. In addition he is a killer. He tells me the truth only accidentally.... He is as sensual as a goat, and when he sings to me my spine tingles and sometimes tears come. Penitentiary wardens all tell me that I set no value on my life in using him as a traveling companion. I am thinking of bringing him to New York in January.”<sup>27</sup>

*(From The New York Herald Tribune)* LOMAX ARRIVES WITH LEADBELLY, NEGRO MINSTREL. SWEET SINGER OF THE SWAMPLANDS HERE TO DO A FEW TUNES BETWEEN HOMICIDES

*(From Life magazine)* BAD NIGGER MAKES GOOD MINSTREL

*(From the Brooklyn Eagle)* [LEADBELLY]: VIRTUOSO OF KNIFE AND GUITAR<sup>28</sup>

Despite being grounded in what was largely fabrication, the influence and distinctly anti-commercial precedent set by Lead Belly's larger-than-life persona has been felt on numerous occasions throughout the history of rock and blues music. To use the writer, Martha Bayles' terminology, Lead Belly's portrayal of the “solo itinerant bluesman” was immensely appealing to early folk-aficionados who were “steeped in the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 62.

romantic ideal of the lonely artist pitted against a hostile society” (a sentiment to which we already know Jack White aspires).<sup>29</sup> By the same token, one of the key underlying qualities behind Lead Belly’s appeal to white audiences was his combined representation of both the “front porch” and “outlaw” images that Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor identify as central archetypes for the formation of traditional blues identity.<sup>30</sup> Without delving into a dedicated history of the blues and its various landmark performers — a topic which can scarcely be contained in a full-length book, let alone its own single chapter — it is important to realize that Lead Belly’s own musical persona (however romanticized, primitive, and outwardly imposed it might have been) serves as a crucial point of reference for understanding the work of many other blues musicians, both contemporary to Lead Belly and from many decades afterward.<sup>31</sup>

On the “front porch” folk-blues side of things — and despite the fact that most of these artists were more likely to don a suit and tie rather than overalls and a neckerchief — figures such as Son House, Charley Patton, and Robert Johnson represent a few of the more well-known Delta Blues musicians who embodied the same sort of “simple

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<sup>29</sup> Martha Bayles, “Blues, Blacks, and Brits,” in *Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 187.

<sup>30</sup> Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor, “Nobody’s Dirty Business - Folk, Blues, and the Segregation of Southern Music,” in *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music* (New York: Norton, 2007), 88-90.

<sup>31</sup> For further reading on the history of the blues, the following publications offer a wealth of information from a number of different authors and perspectives:

Imamu Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Perennial, 2002).

Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993).

Robert Springer, *Authentic Blues: Its History and Its Themes* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995).



directness and power” that captivated the Lomaxes during their cultivation of Lead Belly’s “down-home” musical persona.<sup>32</sup> What’s more, with the additional uncertainty surrounding events such as Son House’s role in a 1927 shooting and Robert Johnson’s oft-mythologized selling of his soul to the Devil in exchange for his virtuosic guitar playing, the collective mystique surrounding the Delta Blues tradition lends credence to my earlier suggestion about the power and appeal of a compelling (if somewhat exaggerated) personal backstory. Make no mistake, with their collective privileging of violence, the supernatural, and an even more pronounced form of “male braggadocio”, musicians from the gritty, urban (and more commonly electric) side of the blues — i.e. John Lee Hooker, Willie Dixon, Howlin’ Wolf, and Muddy Waters — each portrayed their respective “outlaw” personae in a way that sparked considerable attention from both musicians and audiences alike.<sup>33</sup> That being said, considering how this particular strain of the blues ultimately fed more into rock’s crude “fetishization of lead guitar playing as an athletic event (who could be faster, louder, and more audacious?)”, I am convinced that the simplistic, isolated, and admittedly more romanticized strain of the blues stands as a superior backdrop for the construction of Jack White’s own musical persona.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Filene, “Creating the Cult of Authenticity: The Lomaxes and Leadbelly,” in *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 72.

<sup>33</sup> Martha Bayles, “Blues, Blacks, and Brits,” in *Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 192.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

***“Spittin’ Out These 300 Mile-per-hour Outpour Blues...”***

At the core of White’s apprehension toward being a white musician who plays the blues is a decades-old bit of essentialism which developed into a widely-accepted, yet deeply flawed ideological premise — namely, the idea that non-black musicians are somehow ill-equipped or less entitled to play a meaningful or “authentic” version of the blues. Interestingly enough, one of the most clear-cut applications of this belief comes from a 1969 article by *New York Times* journalist, Albert Goldman. Expressing his bemusement at the widespread “musical miscegenation” occurring around the time of the 1960s British blues revival, Goldman not only ponders the implications of such a previously unprecedented cultural appropriation, but also the motivations white audiences could have had for embracing blues culture in such an eager and all-encompassing way:

What are the kids doing? Are they trying to ‘pass’? Are they color blind? Do they expect to attain a state of black grace? Let’s put it bluntly: how can a pampered, milk-faced, middle class [white] kid who has never had a hole in his shoe sing the blues that belong to some beat-up old black who lived his life in poverty and misery?<sup>35</sup>

Despite its similarity to the ramblings of a good old-fashioned racist, Goldman’s envisioning of the blues as an inextricably “black” cultural property has been echoed more recently by author and blues enthusiast, Julio Finn. Insisting upon a direct correlation between an artist’s racial heritage and the so-called authenticity of his music, Finn is adamant that even the most respectful and sincere white blues performance will

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<sup>35</sup> Albert Goldman, “Why Do Whites Sing Black?” in *Sound Bites* (Turtle Way Books, 1992), 151-53.

invariably pale in comparison to one which has been informed by the unimpeachable element of genealogical privilege:

[White blues performers] can never be *bluespeople* [...] because the blues is not something they live but something they *do* — which makes all the difference in the world. What distinguishes the bluesperson from the blues performer is cultural-racial make-up, which can only be inherited by a descendent of an ex-American slave.<sup>36</sup>

As it is hardly my intention (nor within the scope of my research) to provide an answer as to whether the blues should be viewed in such a clear-cut and racially-oriented manner, I will merely offer an explanation as to how I believe Jack White has acquitted himself as one of the more successful and — dare I say it? — “authentic” white blues performers in recent memory. In order to accomplish such a task, I begin with a quote from Muddy Waters on the subject of some of his earliest and most influential white-blues acolytes, the Rolling Stones:

I think they're great people, but they're not blues players. Really, what separates them from people like [Howlin'] Wolf and myself, we're doing the stuff like we did way years ago down in Mississippi. These kids are just getting up, getting stuff and going with it, you know, so we're expressing our lives, the hard times and the different things we been through. It's not real. They don't feel it. I don't think you can feel the blues until you've been through some hard times.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Julio Finn, *The Bluesman: The Musical Heritage of Black Men and Women in the Americas* (New York: Interlink Books, 1992), 229, quoted in Ulrich Adelt, “Black, White and Blue: Racial Politics of Blues Music in the 1960s” (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 2007), 1, in Iowa Research Online, <http://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1313&context=etd> (accessed December 5, 2012).

<sup>37</sup> Martha Bayles, “Blues, Blacks, and Brits,” in *Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 193.

In response to the above mentioned Muddy Waters quote, Martha Bayles is eager to point out the significance of such a distinctly non-racial and comparably inclusive definition of what it takes to play with real “blues feeling”. As opposed to restricting this foundational performative quality to “a function of skin color, geography, social class, or relationship to the means of production”, Waters instead pitches blues feeling as “the product of long hard experience, with life as well as with music.”<sup>38</sup> For the sake of my discussion on the legitimacy of Jack White’s persona as a white musician who plays the blues, I would argue that the hard-fought struggle necessary to achieve “blues feeling” is as reasonable a benchmark as any for the measurement of an artist’s so-called level of musical authenticity. Though we may find that White’s average working-class upbringing cannot compare to the trials faced by African-American performers in the early twentieth century, the considerable (albeit self-imposed) struggle White has faced in the White Stripes is undeniably present in the restrictions surrounding both the duo’s music and overall artistic identity. While it could be argued that any white musician who has attained success or notoriety playing the blues (i.e. Eric Clapton, Stevie Ray Vaughan) has probably toiled in some similar way, the utter centrality of this struggle to the White Stripes’ aesthetic is a clear means through which Jack White has aimed to set his own interpretation of blues authenticity apart.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 193.

***“A Seven Nation Army Couldn’t Hold Me Back...”***

In a recent interview with *Uncut* magazine, White reveals that one of the earliest motivations driving his work with the White Stripes was a desire for a new and meaningful context in which to carry on the “authentic” tradition of Son House and Robert Johnson. Having been disillusioned with traditional “white blues” discourse on what constitutes a “real” or legitimate bluesman, White has made it a well-known priority to take traditional conceptions of blues authenticity and to flip them on their head:

With the White Stripes, I wanted to have a new blues. [...] ‘Seven Nation Army’ has become a soccer chant to some people, but to me it’s a blues song, a struggle of one person against the world. The sound, the rhythm, is not what someone would [typically] label blues, and I think that happens with a lot of [my other] songs [...] as well. I consider all of it to be the blues, but I’m trying to present it in a way that shakes it up for me and the listener.

[...] When we played our first shows [as the White Stripes] a lot of people were really mad at the colours we wore. To me, how we presented ourselves was to show people how stupid it is for them to think that, to play authentic blues, I’d have to dress like I’m from fucking Mississippi. Eric Clapton, for example, said he didn’t like the White Stripes. He thought we were having a laugh about Son House, playing ‘Death Letter’ on the Grammys. People in that Stratocaster white blues scene didn’t understand that we could dress in red and white and black, play in the simplistic way we did and still be the blues.<sup>39</sup>

Through his repeated attempts to “shake up” the conceptions of both himself and his audience, White’s distinctive re-imagining of the blues effectively liberates the genre from being a strict musical form built around three chords and a recurring twelve-bar

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<sup>39</sup> John Mulvey, “The Same Boy You’ve Always Known: A Jack White Interview,” *Uncut*, June 19, 2012, <http://www.uncut.co.uk/blog/wild-mercury-sound/the-same-boy-youve-always-known-a-jack-white-interview> (accessed March 8, 2013).

structure, and expands it to encompass nearly any musical piece which uses “storytelling, melody, and rhythm” to express some form of intense personal struggle.<sup>40</sup> As demonstrated through the barrage of restrictions and obstacles to which White has subjected himself over the course of his career (see below), it is safe to assume that his own personal understanding of blues authenticity — or in his words, “musical truth” — is in close alignment with the philosophy posed earlier by Bayles’ quote from Muddy Waters. Comparing this vision to the self-indulgent virtuosity and staunch anti-commercialism the blues came to embody under Eric Clapton and the rest of the 1960s British blues scene, it is hardly surprising that White has clashed so significantly with any form of blues that fails to center around this empirical (if somewhat idealistic) obsession with the value of a hard-fought struggle. Conversely, and also bearing in mind the extent to which artists such as Clapton aimed to shed inauthenticity through their abandonment of a commercially viable stage presence, it is essential that we realize how drastically White differs from such white blues musicians through his cultivation of a bizarre, yet highly marketable visual aesthetic.

***“But Don’t Take It Easy On Me (I Don’t Know How To Take It...)”***

At its very core, White’s penchant for making things as hard on himself as possible in the White Stripes is an extension of his commitment to the “one man against the world” mythology put forth by popular discourse surrounding artists such as Son House and Robert Johnson. As we have already seen, this discourse is almost invariably

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<sup>40</sup> Jim Jarmusch, “The White Stripes: Getting to Know the Most Interesting Band in Music Today,” *Interview Magazine*, May 2003, 91. [http://whitestripes.com/lo-fi/PDFs/Interview\\_May2003.pdf](http://whitestripes.com/lo-fi/PDFs/Interview_May2003.pdf) (accessed March 8, 2013).

partial to musicians of African-American heritage, while making most any attempt at legitimacy by white musicians subject to a rigorous (and often unattainable) series of tests aimed at questioning one's suitability for operating within the storied and highly exclusive blues medium. While it is difficult to say thus far whether White's embrace of self-imposed adversity is an effort to either meet or subvert his expectations about the personal turmoil inherent to what he calls "the pinnacle of the blues", it is beyond question that his deliberate and calculated use of personal fronts to achieve such an effect has been a leading force in the construction of his compelling musical persona.<sup>41</sup>

Beyond his infatuation with the mythology of the Delta Blues, there have been a number of other influences over the course of White's life which have convinced him of the value of not overcomplicating things, and perhaps more importantly, "knowing when to stop".<sup>42</sup> A paramount example of this can be seen in his strict adherence to the quasi-mystical properties of the number three — a principle he allegedly stumbled across while working as an apprentice for his friend and former upholstery master, Brian Muldoon:

"The first time it hit me, I was working in an upholstery shop. There was a piece of fabric over part of a couch. The guy I was working for put in three staples. You couldn't have one or two, but three was the minimum way to upholster something. And it

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<sup>41</sup> Brian Hatt, "Jack White, the Decade's Dirty Bluesman," *Rolling Stone*, February 2, 2011, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/jack-white-the-decades-dirty-bluesman-20110202> (accessed February 16, 2013).

<sup>42</sup> Keith Cameron, "The Sweetheart Deal," *Guardian*, March 29, 2003. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2003/mar/29/artsfeatures.popandrock> (accessed March 23, 2011).

seemed things kept revolving around that. [...] After two, three meant many, and that was it, you don't have to go any further than that [...].<sup>43</sup>

“The number three exemplifies the almost iconic, mysterious perfection that cannot be obtained. A table has to have three legs or else it falls down. A traffic light has three lights. A car wheel can stay on with three bolts. It goes on and on. There are these three elements to everything, and if you can discover what those three are as your structure, then you're on the right path. To this day, I still think about it all the time. When I write a song, I have to build a structure, I have to build upon that.”<sup>44</sup>

As fate would have it, the influence that the number three would have upon the structure of the White Stripes can be seen in nearly every facet of the band's aesthetic, from their trademark red-white-and-black colour scheme, to their typical musical arrangement of guitar, vocals, and drums. On a slightly deeper level, this framework has also found its way into the band's underlying songwriting process — adhering strictly to the aforementioned elements of storytelling, melody, and rhythm — and has even formed the basis for one of their earliest original songs, “The Big Three Killed My Baby”.

“Three is the minimum number required to hold anything together. [...] When I write songs, I write three notes. I use three chords, three lines, three verses. That's all you really need.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Everett True, “Let's Build a Home,” in *The White Stripes and the Sound of Mutant Blues* (London: Omnibus Press, 2004), 94.

In this same conversation, White also recognizes the connection between his “3” principle and the Christian Holy trinity. With his upbringing as a devout Roman Catholic, it is not unreasonable to assume that religion has also played a role in White's affinity for symbolism and a punishingly ritualized work ethic.

<sup>44</sup> Alexis Petridis, “Jack White: 'I don't like to take the easy way out, on anything I do',” *Guardian*, April 13, 2012. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2012/apr/13/jack-white-solo-project-blunderbuss> (accessed January 16, 2013).

<sup>45</sup> Claire Suddath, “A Rock Star Changes His Stripes,” *Time Magazine*, May 21, 2011, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2068079,00.html> (accessed June 27, 2012).



“It came out the most [for us] on ‘The Big Three Killed My Baby’, it’s three chords and three verses, and we accent threes together all through that. It was a number I always thought of as perfect, or our attempt at being perfect.”<sup>46</sup>

With its chaotic swarm of distorted guitar and cannon-fire drumming, “Big Three” harnesses White’s well-known frustration with the automotive industry — a sensitive issue for many Detroit natives, to be sure — and fuses it into a recording which is vividly reminiscent of the punk-rock heritage to which White owes much of his stripped-down, “do-it-yourself” artistic tendencies. While it is true, however, that the White Stripes share a deep and lasting connection to artists such as The Stooges, Flat Duo Jets, and The Cramps (particularly in the latter two bands’ intentional lack of a bass player), an equally significant parallel to the White Stripes’ minimalist aesthetic is that of the De Stijl visual arts movement — a school of twentieth-century sculptors, painters, and architects whose principles the Stripes adapted in the liner notes of their second full-length album, *De Stijl*:

When ideas become too complicated, and the pursuit of perfection is misconstrued as a need for excess. When there is so much involved that individual components cannot be discerned. When it is hard to break the rules of excess, then new rules need to be established. It descends back to the beginning where the construction of things visual or aural is too uncomplicated to not be beautiful. But this is done in the knowledge that we can only become simple to a point and then there is nowhere else to go. There are definite natural things which cannot be broken down into lesser components. Even if the goal of achieving beauty from

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<sup>46</sup> Norene Cashen, “1+1=3: Detroit Duo White Stripes Mixes Basic Elements Into Simple Beauty,” *The Metro Times*, May 26, 1999.

simplicity is aesthetically less exciting it may force the mind to acknowledge the simple components that make the complicated beautiful.<sup>47</sup>

As it pertains to the White Stripes, the philosophy outlined above centers around the collective risk and reward that comes from working oneself into a highly restrictive aesthetic corner — a topic White discusses at length in the White Stripes' 2007 tour documentary, *Under Great White Northern Lights*. While painfully aware of the frustration that can occur from such strict aesthetic limitations, White insists that this suffering is ultimately justified by its unparalleled promotion of both work ethic and creativity:

You can bleed some things dry, you know? [After ten years of being in the White Stripes], just working in the same box, [...] one part of my brain says I'm tired of trying to come up with things in this box, but I force myself to do it because I know something good can come out of it, if I really work inside of it.

Deadlines and [restrictions] make you creative. But telling yourself 'oh, you've got all the time in the world, all the money in the world, all the colors in the palette, anything you want[...]', that just kills creativity. [That's why] on stage [...] I like to do things to make it really hard on myself. For example, if I drop a pick, I've gotta go all the way to the back of the stage to get another one. [...] And I put the organ just far away enough that I have to leap to get to it to play different parts of a song.

[...] There's hundreds of little things like that — like the guitars I use that don't stay in tune very well, [...] and they're not what regular bands go out and play. I'm constantly fighting all these tiny little things because all of them build tension. And there's no setlist when we play — that's [actually] the biggest one, too — so each show has its own life to it.

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<sup>47</sup> Jack White, liner notes for *De Stijl* (XL Recordings XLLP 150, 2001).

It's important to do all that kind of stuff! When you go out and everything's all pre-planned and everyone's set everything out for you and the table's all set nice and perfect, nothing is gonna happen! [...] So that's why all those things have always been a big component of the White Stripes — constriction to force ourselves to create. Only having red, white, and black [...] on any of the artwork or presentation of the aesthetics of the band; guitar, drums, and vocals; storytelling, melody, and rhythm; revolving all these things around the number three — all these components [are there to] force us to create.<sup>48</sup>

Despite its conglomeration of what are seemingly unrelated influences, White's envisioning of his ongoing struggle in the White Stripes finds a fascinating parallel in Bayles' description of the blues as a "ritualized reenactment of extreme emotional states."<sup>49</sup> With the consideration that the "purpose of the blues ritual is to *return* from [such] states — to *survive* trouble, [and] not succumb to it", it is hardly unreasonable to suggest that White's own habitual suffering (albeit considerably more self-imposed) might serve as an effective legitimizing agent for his attempts at achieving authentic "blues feeling".<sup>50</sup> Whether or not this authenticating gesture is ultimately deemed successful, it should at least be clear that the various personal fronts White has used as part of the White Stripes' highly-constricted aesthetic have played a pivotal role in connecting him to the tradition of mythologized blues pioneers such as Lead Belly, Son House, and Robert Johnson. Returning once more to my suggestion about the power of a compelling, if somewhat exaggerated, personal backstory (something White has also

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<sup>48</sup> The White Stripes, *Under Great White Northern Lights*, DVD, directed by Emmett Malloy (USA: Third Man Films, 2009).

<sup>49</sup> Martha Bayles, "Blues, Blacks, and Brits," in *Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 189.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 190.

pursued through his presentation of himself and Meg White as brother and sister), it is worth mentioning here White's own belief in the importance of earning whatever mythology is thrust upon an artist by either himself or the general public:

The temptation [to give up on struggle] comes up all the time. [...] Musicians don't really care that much [about how I work] and the crowd definitely doesn't even notice or know what's going on — but I know. And that becomes a big question about art — if you do something that's important and extremely involved in pushing yourself and making something beautiful happen but no one will know it, should you do it? Or should you cheat because no one will know that you're cheating either?

[...] Here's the deal: In all the books, and all the movies and documentaries that are made about these people that we are interested in or that we think have accomplished something amazing, who wants to hear that they took the easy way out or that they cheated?"<sup>51</sup>

At the risk of dwelling too long on a question which was quite clearly meant to be rhetorical, I would suggest that the answer to White's inquiry lies deep within an intricate web of beliefs and ideologies as to what exactly constitutes an "authentic" musical performance. Given that this broad and daunting subject has already been researched by scholars such as Auslander, Frith, Taruskin, and Grossberg, I will not waste time explaining or attempting to summarize what is effectively one of the most elusive and constantly-fluctuating subjects in all of musicology. Instead, using my aforementioned discussion of White's artistic practices and personal philosophies as a backdrop, I will

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<sup>51</sup> Conan O'Brien, "Rocker Jack White - Serious Jibber Jabber with Conan O'Brien" (January 10, 2013), TeamCoco.com, Flash video file, <http://teamcoco.com/video/serious-jibber-jabber-04-jack-white> (accessed March 8, 2013).

merely offer a suggestion as to how we might utilize this scholarship in our evaluation of the White Stripes' attempts at cultivating the element of "musical truth".

***"We All Need To Do Something (To Try To Keep The Truth From Showing Up...)"***

In what is easily Jack White's favorite piece of journalism ever written about the White Stripes, music critic Chuck Klosterman suggests that the duo are "simultaneously more real and more fake than any other American rock band."<sup>52</sup> Though, on the surface, this assertion sounds like little more than an attempt to sensationalize the band with a catchy, yet relatively meaningless headline, a closer look at the role of authenticity in rock music — and specifically in relation to the work of the White Stripes — reveals that Klosterman's criticism may actually be on to something considerably more profound.

According to Richard Taruskin, the most basic understanding of authenticity involves "knowing what you mean and whence comes that knowledge", in addition to "knowing what you are, and acting in accordance with that knowledge."<sup>53</sup> In the context of the rock tradition, this understanding invariably requires that artists "achieve and maintain the effect of authenticity by continuously citing in their music and performance styles the norms of authenticity for their particular rock subgenre and historical moment".<sup>54</sup> As a general rule, this citation of rock authenticity typically depends on the

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<sup>52</sup> Chuck Klosterman "The White Stripes, 'Elephant'," *Spin*, June 30, 2003, <http://www.spin.com/reviews/white-stripes-elephant-v2third-man-recordings> (accessed September 27, 2012).

<sup>53</sup> Richard Taruskin, "The Limits of Authenticity: A Contribution," in *Text and Act: Essays On Music and Performance* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995), 67.

<sup>54</sup> Philip Auslander, "Tryin' to Make It Real," in *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 84.

performer's "nomination of something to serve as the inauthentic Other".<sup>55</sup> Although scholars such as Lawrence Grossberg have argued that the parties involved in this opposition are constantly and necessarily in flux, Auslander reminds us that one of the earliest and most enduring iterations of this relationship has been the genre-based ideological distinction between "rock" and "pop" music:

The ideological distinction between rock and pop is precisely the distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic, the sincere and the cynical, the genuinely popular and the slickly commercial, the potentially resistant and the necessarily co-opted, art and entertainment.<sup>56</sup>

Particularly with respect to its designations of 'popular vs. commercial' and 'art vs. entertainment', Auslander's vision of rock authenticity bears a marked similarity to the values espoused by Eric Clapton and other so-called "purists" of the 1960s British blues revival. While Susan McClary explains that the enterprise of this early British rock scene "was certainly not untouched by the desire for commercial success", she also suggests that the "ideology of noncommercial authenticity that first led Clapton and others to champion the blues" played a pivotal role in their collective self-positioning as "rebels against capitalism."<sup>57</sup> In an excerpt from his liner notes to a 1990 compilation of Robert Johnson recordings, Clapton echoes this sentiment, citing Johnson's "extraordinary

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 81.

Grossberg's belief in the fluidity of rock authenticity is more clearly laid out in his 1992 book, *We Gotta Get out of this Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York and London: Routledge).

<sup>57</sup> Susan McClary, "Thinking Blues," in *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 60.

musicianship” and seeming “freedom from commercialism” as major personal influences:<sup>58</sup>

I played it, and it really shook me up because it didn't seem to me that he was particularly interested in being at all palatable, he didn't seem concerned with appeal at all. All the music I'd heard up till that time seemed to be structured in some way for recording. What struck me about the Robert Johnson album was that it seemed like he wasn't playing for an audience at all; it didn't obey the rules of time or harmony or anything — he was just playing for himself. It was almost as though he felt things so acutely he found it almost unbearable.<sup>59</sup>

In his attempt to avoid being “weighed down with the trappings of pop success or pop celebrity”, Clapton utilized his fascination with Robert Johnson to distance himself from the decidedly more polished and commercially viable aesthetic of contemporary British artists such as the Beatles.<sup>60</sup> By doing away with the “smooth harmonies [...] and crowd-pleasing manner” that often accompanied this slick pop idiom, Clapton effectively set the oppositional parameters by which his own musical authenticity would come to be formed and evaluated. With its aversion to image-related spectacle and its “slavish, note-for-note imitations” of both Delta and Chicago blues masters, Clapton's own version of authenticity was rooted firmly in the belief that the blues were to be treated on par with classical music — a tradition in which virtuosity and musical precision are among the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>59</sup> Eric Clapton, “Discovering Robert Johnson”. Liner notes for *Robert Johnson*, quoted in Susan McClary, “Thinking Blues,” in *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 56.

<sup>60</sup> Eric Clapton, “Complete Eric Clapton Interview - Being a Purist Early On,” Music.com, Flash Video file, <http://www.music.com/video/eric-clapton/complete-clapton-interview-being-a-purist-early-on/A10302B00004484338> (accessed Nov. 19, 2012).

more highly valued qualities to which a performer can aspire.<sup>61</sup> Comparing this vision to Jack White's own pursuit of "musical truth" through self-imposed struggle and limitation, it is interesting to note how Clapton's supposedly authentic musical stance in the 1960s has since come to represent the epitome of an inauthentic Other for the White Stripes in the twenty-first century.

***"What Would I Like To Have Been? Everything You Hate..."***

The clearest indication of White's opposition to Clapton and other so-called "white-boy blues" artists is his own identification as a superior alternative to such musicians' anti-commercial posturing and superficial claims to virtuosity. When asked in interviews with both *Rolling Stone* and *Guitar World* magazine about why he refuses to identify with this particular strain of the blues, White responds in a decidedly controversial manner which is nearly impossible to misinterpret:

"Anything I do is 1,000 percent the blues — that word is synonymous with the truth to me [...]. I could play outdoor blues festivals and do that note-pushing Stratocaster white-blues bullshit for the next 30 years. But that's not the pinnacle of the blues."<sup>62</sup>

Everyone tries to do their own version of it but it's very easy with that to become a novelty thing and become comical, or become like a Stevie Ray Vaughan/Jonny Lang thing, where it's just doing tons of guitar stuff. You have to remember that blues music is the easiest music to do guitar solos to. [...] So for someone like Vaughan or Lang to go off and do all these guitar solos and be

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<sup>61</sup> Greg Kot, "Exclusive: Eric Clapton Talks About His Passion for Chicago and Its Guitarists," *Chicago Tribune*, July 25, 2007. [http://leisureblogs.chicagotribune.com/turn\\_it\\_up/2007/07/exclusive-eric-.html](http://leisureblogs.chicagotribune.com/turn_it_up/2007/07/exclusive-eric-.html) (accessed March 8, 2013).

<sup>62</sup> Brian Hatt, "Jack White, the Decade's Dirty Bluesman," *Rolling Stone*, February 2, 2011, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/jack-white-the-decades-dirty-bluesman-20110202> (accessed February 16, 2013).



called guitar gods and virtuosos, it ain't no big thing, man! [...] I'm not saying those guys aren't talented, but they're not Paganini or anything.<sup>63</sup>

On the surface, White's rejection of the "white-boy" blues aesthetic comes primarily from its tendency to verge upon the realm of musical excess. Having already witnessed the extent to which White values the elements of simplicity and personal restraint in his own music, it is not difficult to imagine how grating it must be when this philosophy is replaced by an aesthetic built around self-indulgent guitar solos and a considerably smaller emphasis on the aspect of personal struggle. While many readers (myself included) will disagree with the suggestion that anything the aforementioned guitarists play can necessarily be classified as "easy", I believe what White is getting at here is not so much the amount of effort that goes into developing the skills of an Eric Clapton or Stevie Ray Vaughan, but rather the resultant air of effortlessness presented by such artists in the context of a given performance.

In yet another discussion on the dangers of making blues music look easy, White states that he finds substantially more meaning in the sound of Son House "[missing] a note and [hitting] the neck of his guitar with his slide" than that of "somebody [like Clapton] playing a blues scale at blinding speed."<sup>64</sup> Simply put, the evaluative framework White employs here is a loose reflection of Roland Barthes' concept of the "grain of the voice" — a theory which suggests that evidence of physical

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<sup>63</sup> Jim DeRogatis, "White Riot," *Guitar World*, July 2002, <http://www.jimdero.com/News2002/GWWhiteStripes.htm> (accessed December 3, 2012).

<sup>64</sup> Brad Tolinski, "High Art, Low Blues," *Guernica*, October 15, 2012, <http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/high-art-low-blues/> (accessed January 7, 2013).

process or effort in a musical performance (i.e. “the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs”) is in some ways more important and informative to authenticity than the strictly ‘musical’ sounds of a performance itself.<sup>65</sup> In the context of both the music and creative structure of the White Stripes, the all-important influence of “grain” can be seen in White’s aforementioned development of a decidedly raw and constricted form of musical identity. From his willing submission to the aesthetic strictures of the number three, to his bizarre preference for old, broken-down instruments and a highly inconvenient stage setup, White has done everything in his power to ensure that nothing about the White Stripes’ music or performance practice comes across to audiences as easy. In doing so, White has not only established a captivating aura of myth and eccentricity for his work within the blues tradition, but he has also cast the White Stripes as memorable ambassadors for his modified iteration of musical authenticity.

***“But It Can’t Be Love, For There Is No True Love...”***

From everything we have seen thus far, it is clear that Jack White has modeled himself after a long-standing tradition of performative authenticity in both rock and blues music. Recognizing elements in these genres which have been invaluable to both the production and promotion of his musical identity, White has not only propagated the belief that “musical truth” is a very real and tangible artistic quality, but that it also exists in a highly concentrated and easily recognizable form within the music and aesthetic of the White Stripes. Up until the most recent stages of my research for this project,

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<sup>65</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice,” in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 188.

everything I have come across from White has been consistent with the belief that he is, as Stephen Dalton puts it, “an authentic antidote to contemporary pop’s post-modern posturing”.<sup>66</sup> However, as is plainly demonstrated in the quotations listed below, there exists yet another side of Jack White which seems to recognize the inherent fabrication of both his own and the rock tradition’s obsession with presumably “authentic” musical performance.

“I don’t know if Bob Dylan and Tom Waits are as authentic as I think they are. Perhaps they’re not. Sometimes you start thinking that maybe Britney Spears or someone like that who’s doing exactly what they want to do in the way that they best know how, is more authentic than any of those people you could mention.”<sup>67</sup>

“When Meg and I were starting out playing blues music - the music that is closest to our hearts - I thought the best way to show people how real [our] music is was to give them an artifice. [...] And if someone walked into that bar saying 'This is bullshit! Oh, this a real blues band? They're brother and sister, she's in pigtails, and they've got peppermints painted on everything!', those are the same people that I don't want to connect with. I don't want to share anything with them because they can't see past [the image] and see that this music is actually ultra-real — full of mistakes, messed up, and at least attempting to get down to something dirty. I don't want to use the word "authentic" because I think authenticity is a trap and a waste of everybody's time. And authenticity in music is something that everyone's chased for a long time! [...] People have always said 'Oh, I like this person, but he's not the real deal. THIS guy is the real deal!', and you have to decide for yourself what that means!”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Stephen Dalton, “White Stripes or Shite Hype?,” *The Times*, August 2003, <http://www.rocksbackpages.com>. (accessed November 18, 2010).

<sup>67</sup> Contactmusic, “Jack White Praises 'authentic' Britney,” Contactmusic.com, [http://www.contactmusic.com/news/jack-white-praises-authentic-britney\\_1119563](http://www.contactmusic.com/news/jack-white-praises-authentic-britney_1119563) (accessed February 1, 2013).

<sup>68</sup> Conan O'Brien, “Rocker Jack White - Serious Jibber Jabber with Conan O'Brien” (January 10, 2013), TeamCoco.com, Flash video file, <http://teamcoco.com/video/serious-jibber-jabber-04-jack-white> (accessed March 8, 2013).

By suggesting that a pop star like Britney Spears might eclipse such “authentic” rock heavyweights as Bob Dylan and Tom Waits, White calls into question the very cultural hierarchy upon which much of his own musical persona has been established. More significantly, through his suggestion that the notion of authenticity is itself little more than a “trap”, White drastically re-contextualizes any vision of “truth” we might have previously attributed to his work, thus forcing us to reconsider whether there is any trace of honesty or value left in the White Stripes’ music or visual aesthetic.

Expanding on Klosterman’s earlier suggestion, I would argue that not only are the White Stripes one of the most simultaneously “real” and “fake” bands in the world, but that the distinct sense of *realness* surrounding their work comes as a result of the band’s dealings with self-imposed artifice and myth-making. By presenting the White Stripes’ outlandish aesthetic as a means of deterring listeners from traditional conceptions as to what an “authentic” blues musician looks, acts, or sounds like, White engages the duo in what Lawrence Grossberg describes as the postmodern concept of “authentic inauthenticity”.<sup>69</sup> While this concept is indeed useful for its assertion that “the only possible claim to authenticity is derived from [an artist’s] knowledge and admission of [his own] inauthenticity”, a significant obstacle it faces in relation to the White Stripes is the fact that White has also striven for “musical truth” in ways which are far more reminiscent of traditional rock ideology (i.e. his romanticized foundation in the blues, his preference for raw musical sounds untouched by the corrupting influence of technology,

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<sup>69</sup> Grossberg, Lawrence. “The media economy of rock culture: cinema, postmodernity and authenticity.” In *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*, edited by Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin, and Lawrence Grossberg, 185-209. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.

etc.).<sup>70</sup> Bearing in mind the eclectic nature of the White Stripes' aesthetic value system, it seems that classifying the band's entire artistic output as a dismissal of all forms of authenticity would be a touch too severe, even for an artist as subversive and opinionated as White. As an alternative to this, I would merely suggest that White's personalized ideals of truth and authenticity are in close relation to Jean Baudrillard's theories on simulacra and simulation.

With his belief in society's enslavement to a framework of symbols and images with minimal connection to the so-called "real world", much of Baudrillard's philosophy rests upon his demarcation of reality into a progressive framework of four different stages of simulation. The first and most innocent of these stages is that in which an image provides a faithful "reflection of a profound reality", such as in the relationship between a map and a physical portion of roadway.<sup>71</sup> Immediately following this stage is the process of second-order simulation, wherein an image "masks and denatures a profound reality" — much as if our map were to be skewed in some way, perhaps having been drawn out of scale or simply grown out of date. As unsettling as these two initial stages of simulation might appear, where the process truly becomes dangerous, says Baudrillard, is on the level of both third and fourth-order simulation. Whereas the two previous stages are at least grounded by their acknowledgement of an unquestionably real-world origin — namely, the road to which either map refers — the stages of third and fourth-order simulation are respectively defined by their "masking" of a profound reality's absence

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," in *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1994), 4.

(i.e. a map so intricately detailed that it is mistaken for the roadway itself), in addition to the fact that some images may have “no relation to any reality whatsoever”.<sup>72</sup>

Concerned that society is headed irreparably closer to a state of pure simulation, Baudrillard offers a chilling prediction as to how this decomposition of reality will inevitably lead to the “panic-stricken” production of the “hyperreal” — a condition replete with escalated references to “true [...] lived experience”, yet also characterized by its emphasis on nostalgia and decidedly fabricated visions of authenticity.<sup>73</sup> As it relates to both the music and image of the White Stripes, Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality provides a highly workable model for understanding what White has done to place his work in the context of an unmistakable (yet ultimately illusory) vision of “realness”.

Falling nebulously between the realms of second, third, and fourth-order simulation, White’s aforementioned construction of musical identity has involved both the appeal to a skewed vision of rock and blues authenticity (second order), as well as the promotion of a mythology for the White Stripes which has virtually no grounding in either member’s biographical reality (fourth order). Somewhere in the midst of all this, a combination of the band’s experimentation with simplicity, restriction, and their deep admiration for blues music has positioned the White Stripes as the creators of a post-modern version of what a real, “authentic” blues band looks, acts, and sounds like (third order). While it is admittedly quite easy to be taken in by this compelling and heavily-romanticized vision of authenticity, it is crucial to realize that the White Stripes’ own

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 4.

musical simulacrum is not one which conceals the truth — “it is the truth that hides the fact that there is none.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 1.

### Chapter 3: “I’m Finding It Harder To Be A Gentleman” — Gender Politics and The White Stripes’ Creative Hierarchy

#### *“I Guess You Have To Have A Problem...”*

Despite his attempts to portray the White Stripes as a pair of innocent, blues-loving children, Jack White has often faced intense media criticism for the way his dubious attitudes toward women have been manifested in a number of White Stripes songs. A notable example of this criticism comes from a recent article by Jessica Misener, entitled, “Jack White’s Women Problem”. Identifying what she believes to be White’s pathological need to control the lives and actions of people around him, Misener spends much of her article grilling White for his caustic lyrical treatment of any woman in the White Stripes’ oeuvre who has dared to challenge the authority of his so-called “control-freak” tendencies.<sup>75</sup>

[...]Lyrically, White’s need for control often takes the traditional trajectory of wanting women to be quiet and submissive. [...]“Let me see your pretty little smile, put your troubles in a little pile / and I will sort them out for you[...]” White croons in “Apple Blossom” off 2000’s *De Stijl*. On *Get Behind Me Satan*, he falls in love with a ghost and half-brags that he’s literally the only man who can see her.

What happens when White’s women *aren’t* timid — when they themselves try to exert some control? Then, he makes it clear that he can’t please them, nor does he care to.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Jessica Misener, “Jack White’s Women Problem,” *The Atlantic*, April 25, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/04/jack-whites-women-problem/256349/> (accessed April 29, 2012).

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*



A slightly more in-depth look at the White Stripes' songbook makes it easy to understand the rationale for Misener's accusatory (if somewhat misguided) lyrical analysis. Even beyond the few standout recordings which Misener mentions in her own article, the various instances in which the White Stripes' female subjects are either villainized or subjected to some sort of patronizing male criticism are frequent and difficult to ignore. On songs such as "Red Rain", "The Nurse", and "Expecting", White delivers sharp-tongued lyrical depictions of women who have all abused their feminine powers — whether by lying, killing, or being excessively demanding — to make life as unpleasant as possible for their male protagonist counterparts. On a different but equally condescending note, the strident preachings of "Girl, You Have No Faith In Medicine" (*Elephant*, 2003) and "You Don't Know What Love Is (You Just Do As You're Told)" (*Icky Thump*, 2007) pigeonhole their respective female audience as either excessively picky, or hopelessly dependent on the guidance of morally superior men.<sup>77</sup>

As much as I am inclined to agree with Misener's observations on the questionable nature of the White Stripes' gender-centric lyrics, I have a hard time accepting her conclusion that the anti-feminist message of these songs is proof of White's allegedly misogynist beliefs. The problem with Misener's argument, specifically, is that it depends entirely on the assumption that everything White says in the lyrics of a White

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<sup>77</sup> For what it's worth, both Meg and Jack have acknowledged the extent to which "Girl, You Have No Faith In Medicine" borders on misogyny. From Jack's perspective, the song is a thinly veiled commentary about his irritation with women needlessly arguing over headache medicine: "It seemed like this tiny thing was a big, telling sign of feminine behaviour. In my eyes, a guy can just put his coat on and run out the door, but a girl has to take 25 minutes waddling around looking for her purse or whatever. Not that one's better than the other, but they're different." In response to this, Meg's only comment has been to suggest that the song "Makes me wanna smack him. A lot."

Keith Cameron, "The Sweetheart Deal," *Guardian*, March 29, 2003. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2003/mar/29/artsfeatures.popandrock> (accessed March 23, 2011).

Stripes song is something to which he would also subscribe in the context of everyday life. While musicologists have long debated the extent to which an artist's songwriting should be taken as a direct reflection of his own personal values and beliefs, it is generally agreed that the meaning or value of a song is impossible to deduce through a mere face-value reading of its basic lyrical content. According to musicologist, Travis Jackson, "if an analyst reduces rock to its lyrical capacity to reflect social ideals or engender empathetic identification, s/he can do so only on the assumption that rock can effectively be read as a verbal text."<sup>78</sup> As Jackson explains, the fundamental downfall with such analysis is that it not only ignores the way listeners typically experience rock lyrics in the first place (i.e. "as *sounds* emanating from recordings rather than as printed poetry"), but that it also disregards the myriad ways in which an artist can position himself in relation to his own musical craft.<sup>79</sup>

Contrary to Misener's thinly veiled assumptions, the idea of writing songs from an autobiographical perspective is something that Jack White has consciously avoided throughout his entire musical career thus far. Preferring instead to construct his songs around the personal struggles of various unnamed (and presumably fictional) "characters", White insists that not only is his music written from a distinctly anti-autobiographical perspective, but that it also opposes the assumption that one's "personality" and "the art that a person creates" must be necessarily one and the same.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Travis Jackson, "Spooning Good Singing Gum: Meaning, Association and Interpretation in Rock Music," *Current Musicology* no. 69 (2000): 12.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

<sup>80</sup> Mark Coles, "White Stripes Finished While On Top," BBC, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_9716000/9716534.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9716000/9716534.stm) (accessed October 9, 2012).

“I think it’s very funny that people nowadays still think if you use the word ‘I’ or ‘she’ [in a song] you are talking about yourself or your girlfriend at the time! I mean, what year is it? Didn’t they get rid of that prison in the ‘60s?”<sup>81</sup>

“I would never dictate to [listeners] what they should get out of [a song] at all, but I always start with some idea about the characters, and what kind of struggle these characters are in. [...] I don’t really like to write about myself, it’s too boring. I’m not really interested in selling that part of me — public whining about my life is not that interesting to me.”<sup>82</sup>

Despite White’s reputation a master manipulator and all-around “difficult man to trust”, I would not hesitate to suggest that his comments listed above should be taken as one-hundred-percent genuine.<sup>83</sup> Aside from the fact that the self-revealing style of song-writing White mentions has lost some of its popularity since the days of James Taylor and Joni Mitchell (artists such as Adele and Taylor Swift being obvious contemporary exceptions to this), my conviction on this issue comes from the fact that the White Stripes’ entire public image has been predicated on the fact that nobody was ever really meant to *know* who Jack and Meg White are.

As evinced by some of the band’s most lengthy and “in-depth” promotional interviews, the White Stripes are known for being notoriously tight-lipped on matters unrelated to their music, and they have also made a habit of abruptly changing the subject when something remotely personal comes up in conversation. Add this tendency to the

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<sup>81</sup> Steven Hyden, “Jack White Isn’t Like You,” AV Club, <http://www.avclub.com/articles/jack-white-isnt-like-you,73431/> (accessed July 7, 2012).

<sup>82</sup> James Hurley, “Jack White Interview” (July 19, 2012), MSN Video, Flash Video file, <http://video.uk.msn.com/watch/video/jack-white-interview/28bgdx0g2> (accessed November 4, 2012).

<sup>83</sup> Mark Jenkins, “White Lies - Are the White Stripes a Blues Band or Just a Sham?” *Slate*, April 24, 2003, [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/music\\_box/2003/04/white\\_lies.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/music_box/2003/04/white_lies.html) (accessed April, 16 2013).

fact that the public representation of Jack and Meg's "brother/sister" relationship has been an outright fabrication from the start, and it simply makes no sense that Jack would suddenly reveal himself through the thoughts and feelings of his apparently controversial lyrics.<sup>84</sup> As I will discuss at length in a subsequent chapter of this thesis, the shortsightedness of treating White's lyrics as the heart of the White Stripes' artistic substance is amplified by the fact that these lyrics form only a small part of a much broader cultivation of identity and musical meaning. Whereas popular knowledge has cemented the work of artists such as James Taylor and Joni Mitchell as vehicles for personal reflection and confession — thus explaining the *lyrics as biography* analysis utilized by Misener and so many music journalists before her — such criticism is simply incompatible with the White Stripes' work due to a fundamental difference in both genre convention and overall artistic purpose.

***“He’ll Tell Everyone In The World (What He’s Thinking About The Girl...)”***

A slightly more nuanced campaign against the White Stripes' sexual politics has been launched by *Times* journalist, Stephen Dalton. In his 2003 article, “White Stripes or Shite Hype?”, Dalton not only condemns the White Stripes for their “desperately limited

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<sup>84</sup> One of the hallmarks of nearly every White Stripes performance has been Jack's introduction of Meg as his “big sister” on the drums. Despite evidence (i.e. a leaked copy of the duo's 1996 marriage certificate) that this relationship is little more than a lie, Jack and Meg have persisted under the pretense that they are actually brother and sister. Even when pressed by journalists such as Chuck Klosterman as to why they choose to perpetuate this conceit, Jack is adamant that the people who have come out and admitted to the White Stripes' former marriage “are all just fucking with you.”

Chuck Klosterman “Meg and Jack White Talk Relationship Issues,” *Spin*, February 2, 2011, <http://www.spin.com/articles/meg-and-jack-white-talk-relationship-issues> (accessed March 6, 2013).

and mundane” style of music, but he also identifies a number of underlying problems with White’s stubborn adherence to a romanticized vision of the past:

[White’s] lyrics about courtly love and old-fashioned chivalry are amusing enough, but his personal credo appears to be grounded in chauvinistic fantasies of an imaginary golden age when men and women knew their place. [...] Aside from any ethical or political objections to such dim-witted fugeyism, [this old-fashioned ideology] has a direct impact on White’s music. Because boringly conservative artists, as a general rule, make boringly conservative art.<sup>85</sup>

Despite being based on a couple of significant generalizations, Dalton’s criticisms against White find a little more traction simply because he is able to bring his critique outside the realm of pure lyrical speculation. Although his passing reference to the old-fashioned gender ideals promoted by many of the White Stripes’ songs (i.e. “I Want To Be The Boy To Warm Your Mother’s Heart”, “I’m Finding It Harder To Be A Gentleman”) brings him close to the same type of failed lyrical analysis demonstrated by Misener, where Dalton does find success is in bringing White’s dubious attitudes toward gender into a very prominent and unmistakably real-life context:

“There wasn’t equality between sexes and races in the Thirties, but there were a lot of things involving feminine and masculine ideals that were closer to one’s own nature,” White protested recently. “Are we all heading towards this androgynous society where everyone wears the same clothes and we all shop at the same mall? [...] We’re missing out on a lot of things about what a family is, what a male is, what a female is.” Innocuous banter, many would argue, and some will even agree with White’s thesis.

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<sup>85</sup> Stephen Dalton, “White Stripes or Shite Hype?,” *The Times*, August 2003, <http://www.rocksbackpages.com>. (accessed November 18, 2010).

[...] Well, call me hopelessly idealistic, but I just have a hard time respecting anybody who apparently believes society was more ‘natural’ before all this new-fangled equality nonsense.<sup>86</sup>

If nothing else, Dalton’s inclusion of such an infuriatingly essentialist quote confirms that the issue of how gender ought to function in society has at one point crossed Jack White’s mind. Although the practical implications of White’s nostalgic gendered idealism are hazy to say the least, one thing we can say for certain is that the full realization of White’s vision — whatever that might look like — would bear an immense impact upon the relative amounts of power and personal agency afforded to his so-called “natural” manifestations of male and female identity.

### ***“As Ugly As I Seem?...”***

To get a better idea of how White’s idealized gender roles might play out in modern society, one need only take a look at some of the various creative relationships White has shared with women over the course of his mainstream musical career. Even with his lengthy stint in the White Stripes notwithstanding, White’s frequent collaboration with a number of high-profile women has demonstrated a consistent creative hierarchy in which his own artistic voice asserts dominance over that of the supposedly “equal” female artist. Standout examples of this trend include White’s production work on albums for both Loretta Lynn and Wanda Jackson (two of White’s childhood musical heroes), as well as on his duet with Grammy-winning R&B artist,

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

Alicia Keys for the theme song of the 2008 James Bond film, *Quantum of Solace*. Particularly on his collaboration with Keys — titled “Another Way To Die”, White clearly demonstrates that regardless of his collaborator’s impressive background and artistic qualifications, he is in no way adverse to overshadowing her work and infusing a song completely with his own distinct sonic signature.<sup>87</sup> From the jagged, stuttering guitar riffs of the tune’s introduction, to the sinister Dylan-esque tone of its lyrics, “Another Way To Die” not only reeks of Jack White’s intense creative impulse, but it also effectively limits Keys’ contributions to the traditionally subordinate roles of female pianist and backup singer.<sup>88</sup>

In the case of his production work with Loretta Lynn and Wanda Jackson, the sheer dominance of White’s musical sensibility is of critical importance as well. On both Lynn’s 2004 album, *Van Lear Rose* and Jackson’s 2011 release, *The Party Ain’t Over*, White’s influence is so dominant, in fact, that his personal credits on either recording are almost double that of each so-called “lead” contributing artist.<sup>89</sup> Were this not enough to ensure both projects were specifically recognized as “Jack White” releases, however, the point was driven home even further by White’s conspicuous appearance in all music videos and televised performances used to promote each album’s debut. Of course, where

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<sup>87</sup> With her abundance of awards and recurring presence on the Billboard charts, it is really quite surprising that Keys has been cast in such a subordinate role to White. Having taken home eleven Grammy Awards over the course of her twelve-year career (easily surpassing the White Stripes’ six), there is absolutely no reason to think that she would not be capable of composing a suitable theme song on her own.

Evan Serpick, “Alicia Keys,” Rolling Stone, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/artists/alicia-keys/biography> (accessed March 4, 2013).

<sup>88</sup> Jack White and Alicia Keys, *Another Way To Die* (Sony BMG 88697 41364 2, 2008).

<sup>89</sup> Wanda Jackson, *The Party Ain’t Over* (Third Man Records TMR 031, 2011).

Loretta Lynn, *Van Lear Rose* (Third Man Records TMR 063, 2011).

the issue with “Another Way To Die” comes largely from White’s seeming ignorance toward his duet partner’s immense creative potential, such self-indulgent behavior as demonstrated with Loretta Lynn and Wanda Jackson is something which, in large part, comes with the territory of being a sought-after mainstream music producer — something for which we can hardly put White at fault.<sup>90</sup> If anything, the most reasonable objection one might pitch against White’s work with both Lynn and Jackson, respectively, is that it promotes the idea that only a strong and compelling man such as White himself could bring these female artists out of relative obscurity, and subsequently revive their careers on a relevant (if temporary) cultural stage.

***“Don’t Know How To Make You Mine (but I Can Learn...)”***

It is also worth noting here that White’s affinity for such contemporarily obscure artists as Loretta Lynn and Wanda Jackson places him in a fascinating parallel with the peculiar, yet discerning tastes of a stereotypical record collector. Just as Will Straw has described the work of such collectors as “material evidence of the homosocial information mongering which is one underpinning of male power”, I would suggest that

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<sup>90</sup> Jacqueline Warwick’s book, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture*, has explored the “hierarchical roles” often preferred by big-name (male) music producers. With specific reference to auteurs such as Phil Spector, George “Shadow” Morton, and Berry Gordy, Warwick suggests that, like White, it has not been uncommon for these producers to become “famous as much for their eccentricities [...] as for their excellent musical instincts”, in addition to making sure that “their own name [often] eclipse[s] the names of performers on their records.”

Jacqueline Warwick, “Record Producers and the Politics of Production,” in *Girl Groups, Girl Culture: Popular Music and Identity in the 1960s* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 93.



White's personal cultivation of artists such as Lynn and Jackson may be regarded as a similar technique for acquiring his own unique brand of cultural capital.<sup>91</sup>

According to Straw's research, much of the base masculine impulse for collecting records derives from a desire to set one's own tastes apart from the masses, while maintaining the necessary knowledge and interest in the mainstream to function as a reputable source of musical expertise. Though Straw explains how this act of "salvaging popular cultural artefacts" can occasionally result in a number of atypical social tendencies (i.e. "the dandy", "the nerd", or "the brute"), he also emphasizes that one of the more "recuperable stances" a collector might develop toward society is that of the "hip" connoisseur.<sup>92</sup>

With the extent to which both can be viewed as "adventurous hunter[s], seeking out examples of the forgotten or the illicit", it is clear that Jack White fits easily into Straw's above-mentioned archetype.<sup>93</sup> From his obsession with the music and musicians of the Delta Blues era to his well-known distaste for the majority of modern technology, White's artistic identity is so deeply entrenched in a sense of obscurity and fetishized nostalgia that it scarcely seems possible for him to have captivated mainstream audiences for as long as he actually has. On the other hand, through his ability to move deftly "between the immediacy of unfettered expression and the acknowledgement that [the] tradition or genealogy [of rock music] is [constantly] being reworked or updated", White

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<sup>91</sup> Will Straw, "Sizing Up Record Collections: Gender and Connoisseurship in Rock Music Culture," in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (London: Routledge, 1997), 4.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. 5

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. 7-8.

has simultaneously found a means of staying connected to these elements of his romanticized musical ancestry, while also incorporating them as constituent portions of his own artistic persona.<sup>94</sup>

As I have already discussed in Chapter 1, the overarching structure of White's artistic identity is unprecedentedly intricate, and has been dependent on the successful intermingling of pop music touchstones from both the extreme past and present. Bearing this quality in mind, it should hardly come as a surprise that as much as these collaborations have helped rejuvenate the cultural status of both Loretta Lynn and Wanda Jackson (however briefly), it is likely that White's own intentions for each partnership were a touch more self-serving in nature. To quote an argument from Matthew Bannister's *White Boys, White Noise*, "taste is a form of cultural power, and judgements about taste are often justified by recourse to intellectual criteria."<sup>95</sup> When attempting to harness or wield such power, says Bannister, it is not uncommon for an artist to position himself as pop-cultural *auteur*, and to present the world with an "aestheticisation or 'purification' of mass culture" — such as White has clearly done through his valorization of artists such as Lynn, Jackson, and his assortment of Delta Blues heroes.<sup>96</sup>

While Bannister is clearly aware of the benefits such auteurism might hold for the development of pop music in general (crucial figures such as Phil Spector and Brian Wilson are also mentioned in his discussion), the danger of an aesthetic based on

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid. 8

<sup>95</sup> Matthew Bannister, "Powerless Power: Masculine Intellectualism and Aesthetics," in *White Boys, White Noise: Masculinities and 1980s Indie Guitar Rock* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 25.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 25.

“mutually opposing categories of high and low ” (i.e. White’s vision of real versus fake) is that it naturalizes a value system in which “patriarchal dualism” and “hegemonic masculinities” reign supreme.<sup>97</sup> Given the extent to which we have already seen White exert his own form of artistic hegemony over female collaborators such as Lynn, Jackson, and Keys, it is perhaps not surprising that he should be involved in a trend wherein creative and artistic control are held predominantly by men. That being said, in the context of a discussion already focused on White’s seemingly misogynist tendencies, his association with such a blatantly anti-feminist aspect of pop culture can hardly be said to do him any favours.

***“I’m Bound To Pack It Up...”***

Through my discussion in the previous few paragraphs, I have hoped to establish that a good deal of Jack White’s professional dealings with women bear signs of a personal ideology which is consistent with the charges of misogyny laid against him by critics such as Jessica Misener and Stephen Dalton. Though I believe I have so far accomplished my goal of highlighting White’s tendency to dominate and control the women he works with, I am also aware of the fact that we have no way of knowing whether this dominance has been of White’s own design, or if it has simply come as a result of his collaborators preferring to let White’s proven creative impulse take the lead. Whatever the case may be, it seems clear that any investigation concerned with uncovering White’s true feelings toward women and socially-acceptable gender roles

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

would be woefully incomplete without an examination of how he has interacted with one of the most important women ever to come into his life — namely, his bandmate, ex-wife, and so-called “big sister”, Meg.

Apart from providing over a decade’s worth of music, concert footage, and media coverage on which to draw, a distinct analytical advantage to White’s relationship with Meg is that it marks the point in his collaborative career in which he was most clearly and uncontestedly in control. Although much of Jack’s effusive praise towards Meg insists that she has always been a valued member of the band, a closer look at some of the terminology White has used to deliver this praise reveals that Meg is often pictured less as a respected creative partner and more often as a voiceless conduit for Jack’s obsessive pursuit of simplicity and musical truth:

Meg’s never had goals of being Neil Peart or anything, and that’s what I love about her. what she does is just so simple and child-like. You couldn’t have a male drummer and ask him to do that; he wouldn’t be able to do it. And I’ve tried: it doesn’t work.<sup>98</sup>

There’s a lot of it that she doesn’t understand herself, and doesn’t understand what she’s providing to the music that’s being made — or even iconically, to the world. [...] I don’t know if she can really comprehend it. Part of her doesn’t care, even if it’s true.<sup>99</sup>

I strive for Id only so I can accidentally run into Ego when creating [...] Meg is Id-ridden and that’s why I like to play with her. The rest of us are just trying to be like that and get somewhere

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<sup>98</sup> Christopher Scapelliti, “The House That Jack Built,” *Guitar World*, May 2004, 70-78,149-152.

<sup>99</sup> Barney Hoskyns, “Jack White: 'Is It Fun to Make Music? I Don't Really Know' - an In-Depth Q&A From the Vaults,” *The Guardian*, April 3, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/musicblog/2012/apr/03/jack-white-interview>(accessed September 18, 2012).

simple and beautiful. She's an enigma to me. She is, in a lot of ways, the best musician I'll ever play with. There's a naive genius to her.<sup>100</sup>

Taken on their own, Jack's thoughts here paint a disturbing picture of how truly stereotyped and commoditized Meg has become with the context of the White Stripes' aesthetic framework. With his particular focus on the value of Meg's primitive musical abilities to his own creative process — and how none of these qualities would be available if Meg happened to have a penis — Jack not only reduces his bandmate to another well-placed obstacle on his ongoing quest for authenticity, but he also reveals an essentialist personal belief in qualities such as simplicity and primal instinct as being particularly feminine traits.

In a manner quite befitting his other overtly nostalgic tendencies, Jack's evaluation of Meg as both "simple" and "the best musician I'll ever play with" bears a marked similarity to the notion of "true womanhood" which emerged in America during the first few decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>101</sup> As sociologist Stephanie Coontz explains, the idealized expectation for women to be living examples of "purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" arose in the wake of an ideological tradition which pushed for the advancement of "competitive individualism and formal egalitarianism for men."<sup>102</sup> Though one of the primary aims of this tradition was to establish a sociological

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<sup>100</sup> Barney Hoskyns, "There's a Voice in Me Saying Slow Down': Jack White Looks Back," *Uncut*, November 2009, <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/theres-a-voice-in-me-saying-slow-down-jack-white-looks-back/> (accessed July 9, 2012).

<sup>101</sup> Stephanie Coontz, "'My Mother Was A Saint': Individualism, Gender Myths, and the Problem of Love," in *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 58.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 45, 58.

framework which would lead to the independent “self-made *man*” of industrial capitalism (an archetype which Jack White clearly embodies), Coontz explains that such a drastic re-thinking of man’s responsibilities outside the home necessitated a similar re-defining of woman’s role within it:

Originally, male and female principles, public and private relations, were supposed to balance and complement each other. But as several philosophers have recently pointed out, the Western tradition gradually came to view independence and concern for others as mutually exclusive traits. Caring for others was confined to women, and personal autonomy was denied them; personal autonomy was reserved for men, and caring for others was either denied them or penalized.<sup>103</sup>

Viewed through the lens of Coontz’s independent/domesticated gender dichotomy, the mystifying longevity of the White Stripes’ male-dominated arrangement (examined below) begins to make a little more sense. While, admittedly, Jack and Meg’s attempts to conceal the details of their “private” personal lives makes a comparison to the home-life of a 19th-century American family somewhat difficult, the explicitly gender-based hierarchy which has emerged between the two members of the band offers ample opportunity for comparison between the public image of the White Stripes and the countless men and women who have engaged in the so-called “cult of domesticity”.<sup>104</sup>

According to Coontz, one of the earliest critical milestones for the cult of domesticity in America was the "striking rearrangement of gender identities and

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 53.

stereotypes" by liberal social theorists of the early-nineteenth century.<sup>105</sup> Determined to make a distinction "between a private life based on interdependence and a public life based on individual pursuit of self-interest", these theorists concluded that in order to achieve a balance between two conflicted orientations of society, it was necessary to "[sharpen] the division of labor between men and women", as well as to "[emphasize] the ways that men and women required each other — the *incompleteness* of one without the other.<sup>106</sup> As Coontz explains later on in her chapter, the implications of this process were far-reaching and had a significant impact on the formation of socially-acceptable gender roles:

To men were assigned all the character traits associated with competition: ambition, authority, power, vigor, calculation, logic and single-mindedness. To women were assigned all the traits associated with co-operation: gentleness, sensitivity, expressivism, altruism, empathy, personalism, and tenderness.<sup>107</sup>

[...] As mother, daughter, sister, and wife, woman cared for son, father, brother, and husband. Yet, in order to give this care, she also depended on the economic support of such men. Thus, [...] women were defined as dependents because everyone else was dependent on them. <sup>108</sup>

In relation to Jack and Meg's respective artistic personae, the shocking relevance of the aforementioned gender stereotypes helps illuminate the White Stripes' creative hierarchy in a way that is both historically unconventional, and in some respects, morally offensive.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 59.

To begin with, the lasting applicability of such terms as “ambition”, “calculation”, and “authority” to describe Jack’s position in the band — not to mention how well adjectives such as “childish”, “dependent”, and “sensitive” seem to encapsulate Meg — indicates that not only is the White Stripes’ creative hierarchy mildly oppressive to its only female member, but also that it seems to depend on the continuation of a strictly male-dominated framework in order to maintain the duo’s distinct creative spark.

From the earliest iteration of the White Stripes’ artistic identity, the majority of the duo’s creative power and decision making has been handled exclusively by Jack. Though Meg’s unconventional gift for playing the drums certainly played a role in the events leading up to the White Stripes’ inception, it was, by all accounts, Jack’s idea to capitalize on her primitive child-like drumming style as the primary inspiration for the White Stripes’ minimalist sound and aesthetic:

[After our first few jam sessions] we went and played an open mic night — we were kind of in our own little world. Meg didn’t really wanna do it, but I was pushing her. [I thought] if I put her behind the drums maybe something interesting would happen. And she played like a little caveman, or a little child!

We started to form everything around Meg. We saw a bag of peppermint candies and I said “That should be on your bass drum. We should paint that on your bass drum!” By this time, I had [also] found a red guitar, [so] this red guitar and the peppermint candies dictated the [entire] aesthetic of the band.<sup>109</sup>

In much the same way that “self-reliance and independence worked for [19th-century] men because women took care of dependence and obligation”, Jack’s comments here

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<sup>109</sup> Jimmy Page, The Edge, and Jack White, *It Might Get Loud*, DVD, directed by Davis Guggenheim (USA: Sony Pictures Classics, 2009). [Clip starts at 1:08:14]



seem to recognize that his own access to personal freedom in the White Stripes was provided largely by Meg's submission to the confines and expectations of his bizarre artistic vision.<sup>110</sup> By acknowledging just how much of the White Stripes' aesthetic framework depended on this initial compliance and musical primitivism from Meg, Jack treads a little bit closer to Misener's earlier accusations about his ideal women being nothing more than "quiet and submissive". All this being said, however, where the case against Jack's questionable sexual politics truly gets interesting is in the consideration of how his behaviour toward Meg has developed over the course of the band's fourteen-year career.

***"You Try To Tell Her What To Do (and All She Does Is Stare At You...)"***

When confronted with the seeming disparity of personal freedom and expression between Jack and Meg White, journalists often turn to a comparison of how the White Stripes have conducted themselves in the context of their various promotional interviews. Though the specifics of these conversations have rarely followed the same exact path, a compelling trend has emerged where journalists are moved to comment on how consistently dominant Jack's own voice is, while Meg is seemingly content (or perhaps forced) to remain quietly in the background.

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<sup>110</sup> Stephanie Coontz, "'My Mother Was A Saint': Individualism, Gender Myths, and the Problem of Love," in *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 53.

“Both seem naturally shy, Meg especially so...”  
[*The Guardian* - “The Sweetheart Deal” (March 29, 2003)]<sup>111</sup>

“The White Stripes are, in most ways, Jack's creation. He writes the songs, plays everything except drums and devised the band's peppermint-stripe color scheme. And he does almost all the talking.”  
[*Rolling Stone* - “White on White” (September 8, 2005)]<sup>112</sup>

“Jack, crisply put together in his requisite red and black, does most of the talking - indeed, Meg is a bit of a sphinx, barefoot in a black baby doll dress, smoking cigarettes in a gold brocade-covered armchair with her legs folded under her. Even when asked a direct question about her participation in songwriting duties (“It would be weird for me to throw my words in there; it's his art, his voice”), she defers to Jack, who takes up where Meg's answers trail off.  
[*The Age* - “Country Matters” (May 27, 2007)]<sup>113</sup>

What is most intriguing about all three of these excerpts — aside from their confirmation that the White Stripes’ lopsided creative hierarchy has been visible to the media for quite some time — is the fact that they specifically depict Meg as a willing and subservient participant in what she herself recognizes as “Jack’s project”. Among other things, such an openly abject admission from Meg raises serious questions about how much of her own creative impulse she has had to suppress in deference to her talented frontman over the years, as well as a general curiosity about what finally made her decide in February 2011 that she was tired of taking Jack’s direction. “I don’t know what her reasons are [for ending the White Stripes]”, Jack told *The New York Times* in April, 2012. “Having a

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<sup>111</sup> Keith Cameron, “The Sweetheart Deal,” *Guardian*, March 29, 2003. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2003/mar/29/artsfeatures.popandrock> (accessed March 23, 2011).

<sup>112</sup> David Fricke, “The Mysterious Case of the White Stripes: Jack White Comes Clean,” *Rolling Stone*, September 8, 2005, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/white-on-white-20050908> (accessed February 6, 2013).

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

conversation with Meg, you don't really get any answers. I'm lucky that girl ever got on stage, so I'll take what I can get."<sup>114</sup>

To hear Jack tell the tale over a year after the band's official breakup, Meg supposedly exercised more creative input in the White Stripes than any journalist has ever given her credit for:

Meg completely controlled the White Stripes. She's the most stubborn person I've ever met, and you don't even get to know the reasons. [...] Even when we were touring 200 days a year, I would have said: Can we do this? Can we do that? [...] I'd be in the White Stripes for the rest of my life. That band is the most challenging, important, fulfilling thing ever to happen to me [...] It's something I really, really miss.<sup>115</sup>

Whether this statement is meant to indicate that Meg actually had ideas of her own to contribute to the band — or rather, that she was simply more reluctant to accept some of Jack's myriad creative suggestions than others — is difficult to say. On the one hand, these comments could easily be read as a bitter attempt to villainize Meg for ending what was Jack's most successful and well-loved musical project to date. On the other, Meg's hasty retreat from the public eye in 2007 (following a well-publicized struggle with personal anxiety) has made it virtually impossible to observe her side of the story and thus determine how to best interpret Jack's biting personal critique. For now, the closest thing we have to a comment from Meg regarding the end of the White Stripes is an

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<sup>114</sup> Josh Eells, "Jack Outside the Box: Jack White Is the Coolest, Weirdest, Savviest Rock Star of Our Time," *The New York Times*, April 5, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/08/magazine/jack-white-is-the-savviest-rock-star-of-our-time.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/08/magazine/jack-white-is-the-savviest-rock-star-of-our-time.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) (accessed April, 8, 2012).

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

anecdote from the band's long-time road manager (and nephew to Jack White), Ben Blackwell:

“I mentioned this to Jack years later, and he didn't know anything about it, [...] but Meg came up to me and said ‘This is the last White Stripes show.’ I said, ‘You mean, like, of the tour.’ And she was like: ‘No. I think this is the last show, period.’”<sup>116</sup>

Though perhaps not entirely surprising, Meg's decision to put her foot down on the issue of whether or not the White Stripes would continue past their 2007 tour schedule represents a massive shift in the power structure that many listeners have come to expect from the White Stripes' image and aesthetic over the past decade-and-a-half. From Jack's monopolization of nearly all of the duo's songwriting credits, to his deliberately chaotic preference for playing concerts without a setlist — thus forcing Meg to rely on a number of sonic, visual, and verbal cues just to keep up in performance, it is clear that the White Stripes' aesthetic framework has depended on an arrangement between Jack and Meg that is strikingly similar to Coontz's aforementioned notions of competitive individualism (for Jack) and forced dependence (for Meg). While Meg's reluctance to divulge if she was ever coerced into going along with Jack's unusual experiment represents a potential weakness with this analogy, it is beyond question that she ultimately found herself trapped in a situation where her dependence on Jack was compounded by how much he also depended on her. The specific operation of the White Stripes' mutual personal dependence is a topic I will explore more closely in a later

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<sup>116</sup> Josh Eells, “Jack Outside the Box: Jack White Is the Coolest, Weirdest, Savviest Rock Star of Our Time,” *The New York Times*, April 5, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/08/magazine/jack-white-is-the-savviest-rock-star-of-our-time.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0\\_](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/08/magazine/jack-white-is-the-savviest-rock-star-of-our-time.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0_) (accessed April, 8, 2012).

chapter of this thesis. Focusing particularly on how the imbalance of the duo's creative relationship has been manifested in the context of their music, I will aim to demonstrate not only how Jack's real-life overshadowing of Meg has been mirrored by a great number of the White Stripes' songs, but also to propose how the specific musical arrangement of these songs might serve as an effective tool for examining Jack White's alleged misogynist tendencies.

## **Chapter 4: “*Til I Purged Every Word In This Song*” — Reflections Of Blues And Gender Hierarchy In The Music of the White Stripes**

In my two previous chapters, I have offered in-depth examinations of how some of the most prominent issues surrounding the White Stripes — namely, their postmodern claims to “authenticity” and their decidedly old-fashioned take on socially-acceptable gender roles — have played out in the context of the band’s ultra-stylized mythology and public image. While the largely extramusical nature of these issues has, in some ways, necessitated an analysis which has little to do with the band’s specific artistic output, I feel that the arguments I have made thus far will be strengthened with reference to how such issues can also be appreciated in the context of the White Stripes’ various performances and recordings. To ensure that this musical reflection is conducted in the most efficient and comprehensive way possible, I will structure this chapter as a series of brief, selected case studies aimed at recognizing the most memorable instances in which the White Stripes’ musical performances and perceived ideological stance have been seen to overlap. Devoting specific attention to the band’s construction of blues-based authenticity and their experimentation with idealized visions of gender, the discussion below is comprised of my own observations on how the White Stripes’ recordings, concerts, and music videos offer some clear performative insights on the duo’s aforementioned socio-cultural peculiarities.

### *Blues / Identity / Authenticity*

Of all the influences at play within the White Stripes' musical aesthetic, the legacy and impact of the blues tradition is by far the most ubiquitous. From the duo's vast collection of Delta Blues cover songs to their frequent incorporation of blues-related elements in their music, there is little doubt as to where the White Stripes have encountered and embraced their most significant artistic roots. As I have already discussed in my first chapter, the way that Jack White has portrayed his relationship to the blues indicates that the White Stripes have adapted the genre primarily as a means of creating and promoting their own brand of authenticity or "musical truth". While this appropriation is clearly in the same vein as the work done by white blues purists of the 1960s and earlier, there are various additional features of the White Stripes' appropriation which have set their own perspective on blues authenticity decidedly apart.

Contrary to the way that common practice has come to define the genre, Jack White's fundamental understanding of the blues relies not so much on the standardization of a three-chord, African-American song structure, but rather on the musical/lyrical depiction of one man's struggle against the world. Through his attempts to achieve this mentality in nearly every aspect of the White Stripes' aesthetic, White has called upon his affinity for the music of artists such as Son House and Robert Johnson, and employed it in conjunction with a number of self-imposed rules and limitations on the band. While I have already spent much of my first chapter explaining how these elements are manifested in relation to the White Stripes' identity and public image (i.e. White's obsession with the number three, the bizarre mythology surrounding the duo, etc.), I have

yet to acknowledge how we can also observe these characteristics — in addition to the band’s more traditional references to blues authenticity — within a specifically musical context. By highlighting some examples in which the White Stripes’ embodiment of these qualities is most prominently displayed, what follows aims to broaden our understanding of what makes the White Stripes’ appropriation of the “authentic” blues tradition so distinctive and compelling.

### ***Cover Songs - Negotiating Performative Stance***

To utilize a framework conceived by Deena Weinstein, the White Stripes’ inclusion of several different blues covers in their repertoire creates the sense that the band has approached the tradition with a number of different performative/interpretive stances in mind. From the perspective that the blues might represent a sort of “past as authentic source” for the duo, we can consider the White Stripes’ recordings of songs such as “Death Letter” (Son House), “John The Revelator” (Son House), and “Stop Breakin’ Down” (Robert Johnson) as crucial, yet highly stylized connections to the duo’s most important musical predecessors.<sup>117</sup> Although the Stripes have taken all of these tunes out of their original acoustic setting (transplanting them into a context of thunderous drums and frenzied electric guitar), their frequent inclusion in White Stripes concerts — not to mention Jack White’s self-proclaimed indebtedness to their original

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<sup>117</sup> The White Stripes, *De Stijl* (XL Recordings XLLP 150, 2001).

The White Stripes, *The White Stripes* (XL Recordings XLLP 149, 2001).

“Death Letter” appears as the second track on *De Stijl* (2001), while “Stop Breaking Down” and “John the Revelator” (referenced in “Canon”) appear on *The White Stripes* (1999).



recorded artists — suggests that the duo has selected them as a means of paying tribute to their musical heroes while also “[validating] their own authenticity as blues musicians.”<sup>118</sup>

On the other hand, the White Stripes’ experimentation with blues covers might also be viewed from a perspective which is oriented noticeably more toward parody. Particularly on recordings such as “Lord Send Me an Angel” and “Your Southern Can is Mine” (both originally recorded by Blind Willie McTell), the White Stripes deliver an irreverent sing-song performance style which, despite staying true to the original arrangement of acoustic guitar and vocals, leans heavily toward the sense that both tunes are imbued with a sense of satire rather than sincerity. Interestingly enough, in a 2002 interview with *MOJO* magazine, White makes a comment about his version of “Lord, Send Me an Angel” which echoes this sentiment almost exactly:

Yeah, it’s hard for me to sing like that, about how great I am. [...] One line goes, ‘All these Georgia women won’t let Willie McTell rest’, and I change it to, ‘All these Detroit women won’t let Mr. Jack White rest.’ To me it’s a joke, ‘cos everybody who knows me knows that women don’t like me that much! [...] But I was toying with the idea that girls are attracted to cockiness, and bad, bad qualities in men. So I feel comfortable with that song, because it’s true. Lying is the artistic way of telling the truth. I’m lying, saying ‘Look at me, look at this’ (puts his arm around imaginary babe)... I’m just telling you the truth — in reverse.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Deena Weinstein, “The History of Rock’s Past Through Rock Covers,” in *Mapping the Beat: Popular Music and Contemporary*, ed. Thomas Swiss, John M Sloop, and Andrew Herman (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 137-50.

<sup>119</sup> Andrew Perry, “Double Fantasy,” *MOJO Magazine*, February 2002, <http://www.whitestripes.net/articles-show.php?id=09> (accessed February 26, 2013).

Surprisingly, the fact that White has questioned his ability to live up to the boastful mythology of the Delta Blues tradition has not prevented him from including the same sort of self-aggrandizing practices in his own original music (discussed below). If anything, what we can take from White's ambivalence toward these songs is an awareness of his sensitivity as to how abrasive their message might appear within the context of a modern social value system ("Southern Can" glorifies the subject of male-dominated domestic violence, for instance).<sup>120</sup> Although White has indeed attempted to smooth over his more controversial influences with the claim that "I'm respecting the notions [these artists are] portraying in their music but I'm not really respecting the people they are", it is difficult to say how deeply he has bought into the mentality on which so much of his own artistic influence has been based.

### ***Original Songs (Part 1) - Instrumentation and Musical Form***

The influence that the blues has exerted upon the White Stripes' original music can be heard in a number of different ways as well. On a somewhat simplistic level, this connection is heard through Jack White's frequent use of slide guitar on songs such as "Suzy Lee" (*The White Stripes*), "A Boy's Best Friend" (*De Stijl*), and "Seven Nation Army" (*Elephant*). Beyond the fact that the slide (or "bottleneck") was a veritable staple of blues guitar players such as Son House and Robert Johnson, there are also those who suggest that the technique played a pivotal role in the formation of the Delta Blues genre itself. As the self-proclaimed "father of the blues", W.C. Handy, recounts in his 1941

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<sup>120</sup> The White Stripes "Your Southern Can is Mine", *De Stijl* (XL Recordings XLLP 150, 2001).

autobiography, one of the earliest encounters with what would eventually become the Delta Blues occurred in the early 1900s in the small town of Tutwiler, Mississippi:

A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of a guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who used steel bars. The effect was unforgettable. His song, too, struck me instantly. 'Goin' where the Southern cross' the Dog.' The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I ever heard.<sup>121</sup>

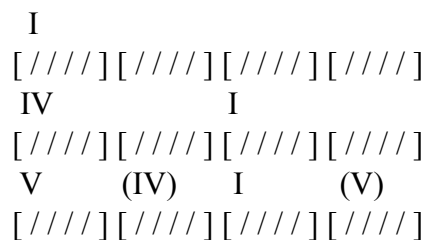
It is interesting to note how well Handy's story coincides with White's aforementioned philosophy on what makes the Delta Blues such a timelessly compelling genre. While perhaps not expressed in such explicitly romanticized terms, Handy's description of this mysterious guitar-toting stranger is a near-perfect match for the "one man against the word" ideal to which White has aspired in his own music. Presumably, White's inclusion of slide guitar on so many of the White Stripes' original songs has been done out of adherence to convention which has long since come to define what the sound of a Delta Blues song is. However, with the knowledge of how affecting and foundational this technique seems to have been for the events leading up to the genre's inception, it is not unreasonable to believe that the slide is yet another means through which Jack has aimed to unite himself with the power and "truthful" history of the Delta Blues tradition.

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<sup>121</sup> W.C. Handy, "Mississippi Mud," in *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography* (1941; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 74.

The White Stripes' connection to the blues in their own music is also recognizable in terms of melodic content and musical form. Particularly on songs such as "Ball and Biscuit" (*Elephant*) and "When I Hear My Name" (*The White Stripes*), the band not only operates within a traditional 12-bar blues structure (outlined below), but also makes reference to a number of significant blues-related tropes.

**Figure 1 - "Twelve-Bar Blues" Chord & Metric Structure**



The first of these references is to a standardized guitar riff made famous in Howlin' Wolf's 1956 song, "Smokestack Lightning". Though historians have described Wolf's recording as a "pastiche of ancient blues lines" drawing heavily on artists such as Tommy Johnson and Charley Patton, the distinctive shuffling riff which propels the song (transcribed below) has been quoted extensively in performances by other noteworthy groups such as the Yardbirds, the Who, and the Grateful Dead.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> James Segrest and Mark Hoffman, "Smokestack Lightnin'," in *Moanin' at Midnight: The Life and Times of Howlin' Wolf* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), 131.

Craig Collins, "The Yardbirds - Smokestack Lightning" (July 7, 2009), YouTube, Flash Video file, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjvKox8kWOg> (accessed March 2, 2013).

palmettopony, "The Who - Smokestack Lightning 1973" (February 18, 2007), YouTube, Flash Video file, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mahxhAo9SVs> (accessed March 2, 2013).

Tim Deibert, "Grateful Dead - Smokestack Lightning (2/19/1971)" (July 25, 2011), YouTube, Flash Video file, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjvKox8kWOg> (accessed March 2, 2013).

**Figure 2. - Howlin' Wolf, "Smokestack Lightning"<sup>123</sup>  
(Main Riff - Note the slithering melody in second and fourth bars)**



**Figure 3. - The White Stripes, "When I Hear My Name"<sup>124</sup>  
(Guitar Interlude - Moving parts heard one octave above)**



**Figure 4. - The White Stripes, "Ball and Biscuit"<sup>125</sup>  
(Main Riff with fill - heard at 0:18 in the recording)**



In "When I Hear My Name" especially, we hear White's tendency to strip his version of the blues down to its most raw and agitated form. Though the recording is not portrayed as a cover of "Smokestack Lightning" specifically, its mutation of Wolf's serpentine guitar lick with White's distorted repetition of the root creates a sense of idiomatic call and response in which White is positioned as both a disciple and a postmodern innovator of the blues guitar tradition. A similar effect is also achieved when White teases the "smokestack" motive in his guitar work on "Ball and Biscuit". Although the studio version of this song only briefly hints at the riff during a fill leading up to the first verse

<sup>123</sup> Howlin' Wolf, "Smokestack Lightning", *Smokestack Lightning* (Instant CD INS 5037, 1990).

<sup>124</sup> The White Stripes "When I Hear My Name", *The White Stripes*.

<sup>125</sup> The White Stripes "Ball and Biscuit", *Elephant* (XL Recordings XLLP 162, 2003).

(see above), a spirited live performance at VH1 studios in 2005 sees the riff played verbatim and repeatedly during the aftermath of a particularly grueling guitar solo.<sup>126</sup>

### ***Original Songs (Part 2) - Mythology and the Importance of the Number Three***

In the context of the White Stripes' relationship to the blues, "Ball and Biscuit" is also an important song in that it demonstrates how the duo has channelled elements of personal mythology into their music as well as their public image. Whereas this image-based mythology has been rooted mainly in the duo's bizarre posturing as brother and sister (despite their marriage certificate being leaked in the early 2000s by the *Detroit Free Press* and various internet gossip sites), the intrigue at play within "Ball and Biscuit" is more closely related to the type of shameless lyrical boasting demonstrated by artists such as Muddy Waters and Robert Johnson.

#### **Figure 5. Robert Johnson, "Cross Road Blues" (Lyrical Excerpts)**

*I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees  
I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees  
Asked the Lord above "Have mercy, now save poor Bob, if you please."  
[...]  
Standin' at the crossroad, baby, risin' sun goin' down  
Standin' at the crossroad, baby, eee, eee, risin' sun goin' down  
I believe to my soul, now, poor Bob is sinkin' down<sup>127</sup>*

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<sup>126</sup> renegotiations, "Ball and Biscuit by the White Stripes" (April 16, 2007), YouTube, Flash Video file, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=03YUGhAshSo> (accessed February 6, 2013).

<sup>127</sup> Robert Johnson "Cross Road Blues", *Cross Road Blues* (Newsound 2000 PYCD 711, 1997).

**Figure 6. Muddy Waters, “Hoochie Coochie Man” (Lyrical Excerpts)**

*The gypsy woman told my mother before I was born  
I got a boy child's comin'  
He gonna be a son of a gun  
[...]  
On the seventh hour  
On the seventh day  
On the seventh month  
The seven doctors say  
He was born for good luck  
And that you'll see  
I got seven hundred dollars  
Don't you mess with me  
[...]  
But you know I'm him  
Everybody knows I'm him  
Well you know I'm the hoochie coochie man  
Everybody knows I'm him.<sup>128</sup>*

In the lyrics of Johnson's "Cross Road Blues" and Waters' "Hoochie Coochie Man", we are faced with the common practice of bluesmen cloaking their artistic personae in a sense of mystery and supernatural intrigue. While Johnson's lyrics are somewhat inaccessible to those unfamiliar with his fabled "arrangement" with the devil, the lyrics of "Hoochie Coochie Man" are considerably more forthright in their portrayal of Muddy Waters as a genuine force of hyper-masculine power.

What is particularly interesting about "Hoochie Coochie Man" is that it participates in the same type of cryptic numerology through which White has constructed much of his own artistic persona. With his repeated reference to the number seven — a figure imbued with great significance in both folkloric and religious settings — Waters

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<sup>128</sup> Muddy Waters "(I'm Your) Hoochie Coochie Man", *Hoochie Coochie Man* (Hip-O-Select B000AO9CUK, 2008).

casts himself in an aura characterized by fortune, power, and unadulterated virility.<sup>129</sup>

While White's own use of numbers in the White Stripes' work is considerably less sexualized, the lyrics of "Ball and Biscuit" are nonetheless reminiscent of the mythological posturing seen in the American blues tradition.

**Figure 7. The White Stripes, "Ball and Biscuit" (Lyrical Excerpt - Third Verse)**

*It's quite possible that I'm your third man  
But it's a fact that I'm the seventh son  
It was other two which made me your third  
But it's my mother who made me the seventh son  
Right now you could care less about me  
But soon enough you will care, by the time I'm done<sup>130</sup>*

Oddly enough, White's own claim to the "seventh son" title is one which is actually rooted in his real-life personal history. Born the youngest of ten children to a Catholic family in Southwest Detroit, John Anthony Gillis (White's given name) was literally brought into the world as his mother's seventh son. Taking advantage of this convenient

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<sup>129</sup> From a religious perspective, the number seven has held particular significance within portions of Christian scripture. Taken broadly to represent the "Fullness, Completion, and Perfection" of God, Biblical allusions to the number can be seen in a variety of forms including the "Seven Days of Genesis", the "Seven Seals of Revelation", and the "Seven Feasts of the Lord".

Richard Amiel McGough, "The Biblical Meaning of the Number Seven," The Bible Wheel - The Divine Seal and Capstone of God's Word, [http://www.biblewheel.com/Topics/Seven\\_Meaning.php](http://www.biblewheel.com/Topics/Seven_Meaning.php) (accessed March 13, 2013).

In more generalized folkloric settings, the number seven has been treated in an equally prominent way. Most closely related to both White's and Waters' use in their lyrics, the term "Seventh Son" is typically associated with "a lucky man for healing, planting, or doing anything", or a person who is "considered to be endowed with pre-eminent wisdom". In a distinctly more superstitious context, the number has also been used to suggest that "to stroke a black cat's tail seven times will bring good luck at cards", or that "to kill a girl seven years old and drink her blood, is a charm against evil influences."

Cora Linn Daniels and C. M. Stevan, eds., *Folklore and the Occult Sciences of the World*, Vol. 3 of *Encyclopaedia of Superstitions* (1903; repr., Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, November 1, 2003), 1326-27, 1353, 1472.

<sup>130</sup> The White Stripes, "Ball and Biscuit", *Elephant* (XL Recordings XLLP 162, 2003).



happenstance years later, White has not only paid homage to his self-mythologizing predecessors in the lyrics of “Ball and Biscuit”, but also expanded the numerology of the blues tradition to include his own fascination with the number three — hence the importance of “third man”.

As seen in chapter one, the significance of the number three for the White Stripes has been demonstrated extensively through the framework and restrictions the duo has placed upon their overarching artistic identity. From their trademark red-white-and-black colour scheme to their oft-quoted mantra of “storytelling, melody, and rhythm”, the White Stripes’ artistic processes have been unwaveringly directed by their adherence to the power and simplicity of the number three. On songs such as “Hotel Yorba” (*White Blood Cells*, 2001), “There’s No Home For You Here” (*Elephant*, 2003), and “My Doorbell” (*Get Behind Me Satan*, 2005), the musical significance of this framework can be seen in the fact that a number of White Stripes’ songs are composed and performed using only three chords. On a slightly more intricate scale, we can also see that a song such as “Screwdriver” (*The White Stripes*, 1999) is not only structured around three main verses (with each one containing its own series of three antecedent/consequent vocal phrases), but that each one of these verses is delineated from the next by the sounding of three triplet accents from both Meg’s drums and Jack’s guitar.

When we consider the extent to which this pervasive framework of “threes” has been implemented in the White Stripes’ aesthetic, it would be easy enough to dismiss the practice as a reflection of Jack White’s already strange and controlling personality. Bearing in mind, however, the aspects of blues music which can also be separated into

threes (i.e. three main chords, three lines in an AAB verse, the three separate fragments of a 12-bar blues form), it is perhaps more appropriate to regard the Stripes' preoccupation with the number three as yet another distant reflection of their indebtedness to the American blues tradition.

### ***Gender / Power / Meg***

As I have already suggested in my immediately previous chapter, the majority of the White Stripes' questionable gender politics are rooted in Jack White's nostalgic vision of how society used to, or rather, ought to be configured. In some respects, the White Stripes' privileging of the male perspective over that of the female in their work might easily be attributed to White's deep, personal connection to the traditions of the Delta Blues and 1960s Garage Rock — two genres in which women have also frequently been villainized or objectified in the context of a given song. Of course, with White's flat-out admission that “‘These [artists] are my idols’, yet I probably disagree with their lifestyle a lot: wife-beating, drinking and carousing, sick behaviour like that”, it is hardly practical to view the anti-feminist values that the White Stripes have projected in their work as the simple emulation of their most significant musical predecessors.<sup>131</sup>

While perhaps somewhat lacking in its analytical complexity, one of the best ways to observe the White Stripes' dabbling in gender-based ideology — both in their art and in the clear creative hierarchy which exists between Jack and Meg White — is to consider the band's personnel arrangement as an exaggerated outgrowth of what Jason Toynbee

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<sup>131</sup> Keith Cameron, “The Sweetheart Deal,” *Guardian*, March 29, 2003. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2003/mar/29/artsfeatures.popandrock> (accessed March 23, 2011).

calls rock's representation of "patriarchal society in microcosm".<sup>132</sup> With "guitar-toting men [holding] the desirable high ground of authentic rock 'n' roll, [while] women are either excluded or have to fight their way through against all the odds", the dominance (both musical and otherwise) that Jack exhibits over Meg is far from unheard of in the rock tradition.<sup>133</sup> Moreover, with the way that bands such as The Velvet Underground have also promoted their percussionist, Maureen Tucker, as being similarly "innocent and pure", the White Stripes are by no means the first successful rock act to have capitalized on the novelty and exotic fetishization of their unorthodox female drummer.<sup>134</sup>

As I will aim to demonstrate in the selected examples below, even the most strictly musical instances of the White Stripes' skewed representation of gender have, in

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<sup>132</sup> Jason Toynbee, "Introduction to Part Nine," in *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, ed. Andy Bennett, Barry Shank, and Jason Toynbee (New York: Routledge, 2006), 343.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 343.

<sup>134</sup> It is worth noting here that in comparison to other mixed-gender bands with non-leading female members (i.e. Moe Tucker in the Velvet Underground, Tina Weymouth in Talking Heads), Meg White's contributions to the White Stripes are imbued with a considerably weaker sense that her distinctive musical qualities were arrived at consciously (or of her own volition).

For instance, whereas Jack has described Meg's "caveman" drumming style as the product of pure child-like instinct (to the point where he even encouraged her not to practice), various sources credit Moe Tucker's "self-schooled" drumming style with deliberately incorporating a percussion system of "rudiments", "endurance", and "African styles" into the Velvet Underground's music.

Similarly, while Tina Weymouth's position within Talking Heads appears to be one in which she was appreciated for her competence as a bassist (and also for her ability to intelligently complement the "quirky" guitar stylings of frontman, David Byrne), much of Meg's artistic value in the White Stripes has been solely dependent on the fact that she is subject to the various and impulsive whims of Jack White's artistic vision.

Andrew Perry, "Double Fantasy," *MOJO Magazine*, February 2002, <http://www.whitestripes.net/articles-show.php?id=09> (accessed February 26, 2013).

Gregory Isola, "Tina Weymouth: Tina Talks Heads, Tom Toms, and How to Succeed at Bass Without Really Trying," *Bass Player*, March 1997, <http://www.bassplayer.com/article/tina-weymouth/mar-97/5958>(accessed March 3, 2013).

"Moe Tucker," *Insound*, <http://www.insound.com/Moe-Tucker/A/50324/#bio> (accessed January 12, 2013).

Robert Somma, "Problems in Urban Living - Fusion, April 14, 1969," in *All Yesterday's Parties: The Velvet Underground in Print 1966-1971*, ed. Clinton Heylin (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2005), 91-92.

some way, had to do with the way Meg is portrayed in relation to the power and agency typically exhibited by Jack. With the understanding that each of these performances may be taken as idealized representations of the qualities Jack would likely attribute to either person's gender, the recordings, performances, and videos cited below add momentum to an already compelling inquiry into the bizarre socio-cultural stance of Jack White and the White Stripes.

**“Passive Manipulation” — *Get Behind Me Satan* (2005)**

Despite being sung by Meg and containing some of the most overtly feminist lyrics in the band's entire repertoire (see below), “Passive Manipulation” comes across as one of the least socially progressive songs that the White Stripes have ever put together.

**Figure 8. The White Stripes, “Passive Manipulation” (Lyrical Excerpt)**

*Women, listen to your mothers.  
Don't just succumb to the wishes of your brothers.  
Take a step back, take a look at one another.  
You need to know the difference between a father and a lover.<sup>135</sup>*

Aside from the fact that it is literally the least substantial piece of music the band has ever recorded (clocking in at a measly thirty-five seconds), the song gains much of its perceived kitsch and insincerity from the way it is portrayed in relation to the White Stripes' broader musical aesthetic.

Musically speaking, “Passive Manipulation” fits well amongst the atypical instrumentation the White Stripes utilized on their 2005 album, *Get Behind Me Satan*.

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<sup>135</sup> The White Stripes “Passive Manipulation”, *Get Behind Me Satan* (V2 63881-27256-2, 2005).

Shying away from the “jet-fueled blues-rock” which characterized albums such as *Elephant* (2003) and *De Stijl* (2000), *Satan’s* abundance of “pianos, [...] marimbas, and other assorted oddball percussion” marks the album as a significant departure from the rock-oriented “authenticity” that pervaded much of the White Stripes’ earlier work.<sup>136</sup> With its emphasis on piano and oddball percussion, specifically, “Passive Manipulation” sees frontman Jack confined to a series of three repeating piano chords, while Meg is given the rare opportunity to lead with vocals, tympani, and the occasional clang of a triangle or tambourine. In the context of the album itself, “Passive Manipulation” appears in a relatively late and unassuming position, sandwiched between the seething frustrations of “Instinct Blues” (one of the few instances in which we get to hear Jack’s trademark electric guitar) and the acoustic folk-funk dreamscape of “Take, Take, Take”. While the belittling sonic context this creates is, to my ears, enough to classify “Passive Manipulation” as something listeners were likely not meant to take seriously in the first place, the treatment the song receives in the context of a live performance lends to the belief that the tune may instead represent an ironic declaration of the band’s (i.e. Jack’s) true stance toward idealized gender relationships.

The White Stripes’ appearance at the 2005 Glastonbury festival offers the most clear-cut example of how “Passive Manipulation” is hardly the forward-thinking feminist anthem it appears to be from its lyrics. For one thing, over the course of its three separate iterations during the White Stripes’ set, the song maintains the same sense of perceived insincerity it achieved in the context of its recorded studio release. Surrounded by

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<sup>136</sup> Matthew Murphy, “The White Stripes: Get Behind Me Satan,” *Pitchfork*, June 5, 2005, <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/8653-get-behind-me-satan/> (accessed March 2, 2013).

adrenaline-charged renditions of songs from as early as the White Stripes' first full-length album, the lackadaisical novelty of "Passive Manipulation" is simply incapable of living up to the impact and guitar-driven intensity achieved by more traditional White Stripes compositions.<sup>137</sup> Add this to the fact that each reprise of the song is initiated by a casually totalitarian signal from Jack — in response to which, Meg obediently (though visibly reluctant) abandons her kit and takes up a position behind her red orchestral timpani — and the true irony of the song's anti-patriarchal lyrics really starts to take hold.

With its encouragement for women to break free of the influence imposed by the various domineering men in their lives (an ironic exhortation, given the dramatic power imbalance in Jack and Meg's working relationship), the ostensibly noble message of "Passive Manipulation" is hindered by the fact that it is laden with secondary characteristics which serve to subvert (or even trivialize) the most direct interpretation of its pro-feminist lyrics. Whether the ironic outcome of this song was achieved intentionally or not, the fact remains that "Passive Manipulation" is a textbook example of how we can observe the underlying misogynist character of Jack White's most basic performative tendencies.

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<sup>137</sup> This judgement is supported by the noticeably less enthusiastic response "Passive Manipulation" receives from the audience at this concert, even in comparison to relatively obscure songs such as "I Think I Smell A Rat" and "Let's Shake Hands".

The White Stripes, *The White Stripes - Peppermint Parade (Bootleg Release)*, DVD (TV Rock, 2009).

### “Hotel Yorba” — *White Blood Cells* (2001)

“Hotel Yorba” is the second track off the White Stripes’ mainstream breakthrough album, *White Blood Cells*. While the recording itself offers little more than a rootsy acoustic stomp through a young man’s fantasy-driven love letter, the accompanying video for the song takes White’s vision of good old-fashioned courtship (“let’s get married in a big cathedral by a priest”), and stretches it to encompass a world in which the woman — namely, Meg — is literally dragged along for the ride.<sup>138</sup> For the most part, the video for “Hotel Yorba” follows the traditional rock stereotype wherein the band mimics their performance along to the song’s original recorded track. With the first introduction of plot at around fifty seconds in, however, we realize that the woman to whom White is singing in the recording is not, in fact, his “sister”/ex-wife Meg, but rather a mysterious red-haired stranger in high-heels and a frilly white cocktail dress.

If Meg were to have simply disappeared at this point in the story — thus leaving Jack and his red-haired beauty to live happily-ever-after — the resultant message of the song would have been rather unmemorable and considerably less disturbing. Instead, in what seems to be a whimsical demonstration of Jack’s desire for masculinized control, Meg’s character is physically hauled around by a rope tied to her waist, as she is forced to tag along for the pursuit of Jack’s own fairy tale ending. With the way that we have already seen Meg portrayed as an accessory to Jack’s real-life rise to fame (see Chapter 2), it is not difficult to imagine the parallels which can be drawn between the image depicted here, and the relationship that Jack and Meg have shared over the course of the

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<sup>138</sup> The White Stripes “Hotel Yorba”, *De Stijl* (XL Recordings XLLP 150, 2001).

White Stripes' career. In particular, Meg's selection to be the maid of honor for Jack's eventual marriage to Karen Elson in 2005 (the same red-haired supermodel who appears in the video for the duo's single, "Blue Orchid") represents one of the most eerily powerful instances in which the White Stripes's masculinist "reality" has also come to imitate their art.<sup>139</sup>

### ***The Truth Doesn't Make a Noise?***

Interestingly enough, one of the most convincing reminders of Meg's subordinate role in the White Stripes is one which has scarcely been documented by any of the probing media coverage surrounding the band's career. Indeed, with their focus on the nostalgic essentialism Jack often spouts in interviews, journalists frequently seem oblivious to the fact that Meg's demonstrated lack of agency in the White Stripes is also reflected in some of the band's most well-known performances and recordings. Aside from the fact that Meg is rarely afforded any type of personal showcasing on a given White Stripes record (nor has she been credited with authorship for any of the band's songs), one of the most striking indications of her musically limited status is seen in how both she and Jack respectively deal with the elements of rhythm and musical complexity in their playing. As a brief examination of nearly any White Stripes song will show, the typical realization of this trend is that while Jack is free to pursue any rhythmic or

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<sup>139</sup> The White Stripes, "The White Stripes - News," <http://whitestripes.com/lo-fi/news.html?year=2005> (accessed October 2, 2012).



melodic adventure he pleases, Meg is rarely heard deviating from the strict *one-note-per-beat* thumping for which she was recruited to the band in the first place.<sup>140</sup>

Perhaps the most glaring demonstration of Meg's limited musical freedom comes from the recordings in which she does little more than act as a living, breathing metronome. Particularly on songs such as "Seven Nation Army" and "Blue Orchid" (see excerpts below), Meg's playing stays consistently on the downbeat, with deliberate and plodding emphases on a four-count kick drum pulse. At the same time that Meg holds down the beat with her seemingly ritualistic thumping, the complexity and rhythmic vigor of Jack's guitar line evokes a sense of liberated virtuosity which is almost universally absent from any of Meg's performances (whether recorded in the studio or taken from a live concert setting).

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<sup>140</sup> As an additional example of Jack's controlling tendencies in concert, it is also not uncommon for him to physically silence Meg's cymbals with his hand if she happens to be playing in a manner which does not suit his vision for the performance. Standout examples of this practice can be seen in both the aforementioned *Peppermint Parade* DVD, as well as the YouTube clip cited below.

renegotiations, "Ball and Biscuit by the White Stripes" (April 16, 2007), YouTube, Flash Video file, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=03YUGHAsHSo> (accessed February 6, 2013).

The White Stripes, *The White Stripes - Peppermint Parade (Bootleg Release)*, DVD (TV Rock, 2009).

Figure 9. “Blue Orchid” - Intro / Verse (Instrumental Lines)<sup>141</sup>

Drum Set

Electric Guitar

D. S.

E. Gtr.

Figure 10. “Seven Nation Army” - Intro (Instrumental Lines)<sup>142</sup>

Drum Set

Electric Guitar

D. S.

E. Gtr.

With the rhythmic juxtaposition found in these examples alone, the musical representation of Jack and Meg’s lopsided interdependence has already begun taking shape. As Jack has often explained in the various articles and interviews surrounding the band, the heart of this process originates from his reliance on the child-like sensibility of Meg’s intentionally simplistic drumming. Through her adherence to the sparse, metronomic pulse for which she has arguably become famous, Meg not only maintains

<sup>141</sup> The White Stripes “Blue Orchid” *Get Behind Me Satan* (V2 63881-27256-2, 2005).

<sup>142</sup> The White Stripes “Seven Nation Army”, *Elephant* (XL Recordings XLLP 162, 2003).

the tempo at which nearly every White Stripes' song is played, but also serves as a noticeably stable and *domesticated* platform against which Jack's more adventurous musical performances are heard and contextualized.

To be clear, my emphasis on the simplicity of Meg's drumming is by no means to suggest that her role within the White Stripes has been any less important than Jack's. Speaking strictly on the topic of the White Stripes' instrumental arrangement, it is difficult to imagine that Jack's guitar playing would be anywhere near as impactful were it not supported by the unassuming (and frequently clever) contextualization it receives from Meg's unorthodox percussion style. Particularly on songs such as "Ball and Biscuit" (*Elephant*) and "Death Letter" (*De Stijl*), we hear standout examples of Meg's tendency to eschew complexity and "mathematical precision" in her playing — a tactic which not only lends to the sense of primitive minimalism the White Stripes play at in their music, but which also underscores in a very musical way the sparseness and intensity of Jack's electric guitar lines.<sup>143</sup>

Figure 11. "Ball and Biscuit" - Intro (Guitar and Drums Comparison)<sup>144</sup>

The image shows two staves of musical notation for the introduction of the song "Ball and Biscuit". The top staff is for the Electric Guitar, written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The melody consists of a series of eighth notes: E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, followed by a quarter rest, then a quarter note G4, and another quarter rest. This pattern repeats. The bottom staff is for the Drum Set, also in 4/4 time. It features a simple, steady rhythm: a bass drum (represented by a solid black circle) on the first and third beats, and a snare drum (represented by an 'x' in a circle) on the second and fourth beats. This pattern repeats throughout the four measures.

<sup>143</sup> Kelefa Sanneh, "If Something's Missing, All the Better," *The New York Times*, July 26, 2007, [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/26/arts/music/26whit.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/26/arts/music/26whit.html?_r=1&) (accessed March 13, 2013).

<sup>144</sup> The White Stripes "Ball and Biscuit", *Elephant* (XL Recordings XLLP 162, 2003).

Figure 12. “Death Letter” - Intro (*Guitar and Drums Comparison*)<sup>145</sup>

The image shows a musical score for the intro of 'Death Letter' by The White Stripes. It consists of two staves: 'Electric Guitar' and 'Drum Set'. The music is in 4/4 time and the key signature has four flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor). The guitar part features a melodic line with eighth-note and quarter-note patterns. The drum set part features a complex, syncopated rhythm with eighth-note and quarter-note patterns, including hi-hat and snare drum sounds.

In what can best be described as a halting juxtaposition of eighth-note and quarter-note patterns, the crux of Meg’s distinctive drumming on these songs is her deviation from the usual rock convention of maintaining constant rhythmic subdivisions within a single measure. Whereas more *traditional* rock drummers would maintain a consistent eighth-note or quarter-note count throughout the entirety of the excerpts listed above (particularly on the elements of hi-hat and snare drum), such a clear-cut and standardized rhythmic treatment would fail to achieve the nuance and compatibility that Meg’s playing demonstrates in relation to Jack’s guitar. By shifting between various levels of volume, tempo, and rhythmic complexity, Meg’s drumming is essential to the White Stripes’ sound for the way that it foregrounds Jack’s performance as the most interesting part of a given recording. At the same time, through her ability to read and respond to the intricacies of Jack’s performance, Meg is similarly adept at ensuring her own musical contributions are neither too much, nor too little for the strictures of the White Stripes’ peculiar musical aesthetic.

In terms of both melodic flexibility and how each member deals with pitch, the majority of artistic mobility in the White Stripes’ sound is also held by Jack. Particularly on songs such as “Seven Nation Army” and “Blue Orchid”, Jack demonstrates a tendency

<sup>145</sup> The White Stripes “Death Letter”, *De Stijl* (XL Recordings XLLP 150, 2001).

not only to perform rhythms which vary drastically across the scale of straightness and syncopation, but also to execute gestures (in both his vocals and guitar playing) which sit well outside of their conventional melodic range. In the case of his guitar work, Jack's expansive melodic spectrum is achieved primarily through the use of a Digitech Whammy pedal (a device used to project a guitarist's tone at many octaves above or below its naturally performed frequency) as well as an Electro-Harmonix Polyphonic Octave Generator (a tool through which a guitarist may dial in multiple octaves of the same pitch and incorporate them into one simultaneous tone).<sup>146</sup> Through his mastery of these particular technological aids, Jack has achieved a conglomerate of ear-splitting high notes (i.e. the guitar solos in "Blue Orchid" and "There's No Home For You Here") as well as notes which are low enough to confuse listeners into thinking they are actually being played on a bass (as in the main riffs on songs such as "Seven Nation Army" and "The Hardest Button to Button").<sup>147</sup> Although this clear reliance on technology goes against much of what Jack has preached over the course of his mainstream career —

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<sup>146</sup> "Jack White's Pedalboards: From White Stripes to the Dead Weather," Dolphin Music, <http://www.dolphinmusic.co.uk/article/4059-jack-white-s-pedalboards-from-white-stripes-to-the-dead-weather.html>(accessed March 6, 2013).

<sup>147</sup> In a way, White's mastery of these tools places him in line with the "masculinized cult of technological enthusiasm" described by Steve Waksman in his book, *Instruments of Desire*. Similar to how the original multi-piece hi-fi stereo units were fetishized by men for aspects of tinkering and individuality they provided, White's amalgam of various and separate effects pedals has been paramount to his production of such a distinctively mobile guitar tone.

Steve Waksman, "Pure Tones and Solid Bodies - Les Paul's New Sound," in *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 36-74.

Interestingly enough, scholars such as Mavis Bayton have also argued that this masculinization of technology plays a crucial role in the discouragement of female performers from the rock music tradition. With the mindset that *femininity* involves a type of "socially manufactured physical, mechanical and technical helplessness", a woman's typical alienation from the knowledge, skills, and community of their male rock counterparts is one of the many reasons why Meg White's subordinate role in the White Stripes is an unfortunate, yet hardly unusual case.

citing technological advancements like AutoTune and ProTools as “destroyers of emotion and truth” — it has nevertheless enabled him to achieve a level of artistic versatility which would not have been possible otherwise.<sup>148</sup>

By comparison, the rare instances in which Meg is heard working with pitch evoke a sense of musicality which is considerably less emancipated than that of her guitar-wielding frontman. Whereas Jack’s vocal range stretches from an E ♭ 3 (heard on *De Stijl*’s “A Boy’s Best Friend”) to the D5 nearly two octaves above (*Icky Thump*’s “I’m Slowly Turning Into You”), Meg’s vocals on “Passive Manipulation” and “In the Cold, Cold Night” span little more than a single octave (from a G3, to an A4). In addition to this imbalance of demonstrated vocal range, the character of Jack and Meg’s performances are also distinguished by the type of melody each performer is typically given to sing. As is shown in the excerpts included below, Jack’s vocal parts illustrate yet again his freedom to jump from one melodic register or rhythmic emphasis to the next,

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<sup>148</sup> Jimmy Page, The Edge, and Jack White, *It Might Get Loud*, DVD, directed by Davis Guggenheim (USA: Sony Pictures Classics, 2009).

while Meg is most often heard operating within a realm of simplicity and predictable repetition.<sup>149</sup>

**Figure 13. “Passive Manipulation” - Meg’s Vocal<sup>150</sup>**  
**(Repetitive scalar pattern, Perfect 5th between top and bottom note)**

Voice

Wo - men, lis - ten to you moth - ers. Don't just suc -  
 cumb to the wish - es of your bro - thers. Take a step  
 back, take a look at one a - noth - er. You need to know the  
 diff' - rence be - tween a fa - ther and a lo - ver. Wo - men, lis - ten to you moth - ers. Don't just suc

<sup>149</sup> From the perspective of musicologist, Serge Lacasse, there is also much we can learn about the White Stripes if we shift our analysis from the issue of *what* Jack and Meg are singing, to the question of *how* they are singing it. In the preamble to his own analysis of artists such as Tori Amos and Alanis Morissette, Lacasse proposes a model in which aspects such as timbre, intonation, and various other “laryngeal effects” (i.e. “whisper”, “falsetto”, or “harsh voice”) are prioritized as telling signifiers of emotion and meaning in an artist’s vocal performance. Applying this sort of model to Jack and Meg’s own vocal contributions, there are myriad ways in which we could further differentiate the character of each artist’s respective vocality, thus lending strength to our depiction of the duo’s pre-existing creative/performative hierarchy.

For now, one of the most prominent ways that Jack and Meg’s lopsided musical relationship can be extended into the White Stripes’ vocal character is through the sheer disparity of depth and variation observed in each artist’s typical singing style. While nearly every recording of Meg’s singing can be classified by its off-pitch, head-voiced, and generally unmemorable delivery, for instance, the underlying characteristics of Jack’s vocal performance — running the gamut from nasal to guttural, screaming to sing-song, and with many variations in between — are considerably more expressive, virtuosic and difficult to pin down.

Serge Lacasse, “The Phonographic Voice: Paralinguistic Features and Phonographic Staging in Popular Music Singing,” in *Recorded Music: Performance, Culture and Technology*, ed. Amanda Bayley (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 225-51.

<sup>150</sup> The White Stripes “Passive Manipulation”, *Get Behind Me Satan* (V2 63881-27256-2, 2005).

**Figure 14. “In the Cold, Cold Night” - Meg’s Vocal<sup>151</sup>**  
**(Repetitive sequential motives, Limited melodic variation)**

Voice

I saw you stand-ing in the cor - ner on the edge of a  
 burn-ing light. I saw you stand-ing in the cor - ner. Come to me a - gain  
 in the cold, co-ld night. In the cold co-ld night.

**Figure 15. “I’m Slowly Turning Into You” - Jack’s Vocal<sup>152</sup>**  
**(Disjunct pattern, Bold leaps between high and low register)**

Voice

I'm slow-ly turn-ing in-to you, but you don't know this to be true. You say I'm  
 ly - in' and I ne-ver real-ly tell you the tru - th. But your face is get-tin' old - er.  
 So put your head on my shoul-der. Yeah, put your head on my shoul-der.

<sup>151</sup> The White Stripes “In the Cold, Cold Night”, *Elephant* (XL Recordings XLLP 162, 2003).

<sup>152</sup> The White Stripes “I’m Slowly Turning Into You”, *Icky Thump* (Third Man Records 162940-1, 2007).



**Figure 16. “Seven Nation Army” - Jack’s Vocal<sup>153</sup>**  
**(Basic melody, yet highly syncopated and in decidedly falsetto range)**

Voice

And I'm talk-in' to my-self at night be-cause I can't for - get.

Back and forth through my mind be-hind a cig - a - rette.

And the mess-age com-in' from my eyes says leave it a - lone

Taking the above-mentioned excerpts as reflections of the creative/performative hierarchy which has emerged between Jack and Meg White, it is easy to see how Coontz’s aforementioned dichotomy of masculine individualism and subservient femininity might apply to the White Stripes’ overarching aesthetic. As we have seen from the juxtaposition of each musician’s own respective performance style (not to mention the fact that Meg has been given minimal input on both the band’s original catalogue and their collective taste in cover songs), the underlying spark behind the White Stripes’ music and image comes largely from the fact that the band has been structured around two performers who are distinct, yet undeniably compatible opposites.

In the same way that men in 19th-century America were afforded their social mobility through the conversely domestic responsibilities held down by women, so too has Jack been granted his distinctive artistic impact through Meg’s willingness to literally stay out of the spotlight. As *A.V. Club* writer, Noel Murray puts it, the fact that “Meg’s

<sup>153</sup> The White Stripes “Seven Nation Army”, *Elephant* (XL Recordings XLLP 162, 2003).

primitive drumming, murmuring voice, and alien stage presence [are often treated] as a running joke” does nothing to discredit the belief that Meg’s unobtrusive role in the White Stripes has been absolutely essential.<sup>154</sup> Without her, it is not only unlikely that the bizarre (and slightly incestuous) mythology surrounding the White Stripes would have been anywhere near as compelling, nor that the barrage of self-imposed restrictions Jack has railed against over the past decade-and-a-half could be embodied in a way which is any more compact or exoticized. Though it is difficult to hold Jack completely accountable for the way Meg has been characterized as the most “quiet and submissive” member of the White Stripes (Meg explains in one interview that her shyness in public and performance have literally “nothing to do with [Jack]”), it is clear that he has always been the most invested and predominant influence upon the White Stripes’ aesthetic and creative decision-making:

In the White Stripes, it was impossible to share the good moments with Meg because she was very uninterested. If something nice happened, it wasn’t like we would hug or have a drink. That wasn’t what went on.

We would record a White Stripes song in the studio and it would be me, Meg and an engineer. [...] So we would finish a mix of a song and I’d say, ‘Wow! That’s pretty good!’ I’d look around and Meg would just be sitting there, and the engineer would just be sitting there. [...] So it’d be sorta like, ‘OK... Let’s just move on to the next one.’ It was just me by myself. But it was the best thing for me. It taught me a lot about trusting my gut.

It’s strange to know that there’s beautiful moments that no one will ever know about. It’s whether I’m going to tell you, because Meg’s

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<sup>154</sup> Noel Murray, “Why Meg White Matters,” *AV Club*, February 16, 2011, <http://www.avclub.com/articles/why-meg-white-matters,51886/> (accessed December 17, 2012).

never going to tell you. There's a sadness to that, a romance.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> “Jack White: 'Meg White Was Uninterested in the White Stripes',” NME.com, <http://www.nme.com/news/the-white-stripes/67629#1> (accessed February 26, 2013).

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Over the course of this thesis, I have demonstrated how American rock duo, the White Stripes, are irrevocably tied up in a complex web of music, image, and ideology. While the band has certainly received its share of attention from fans, journalists, and biographers alike, the central purpose of this project has been to provide a form of in-depth critical analysis which has thus far been excluded from most discourse surrounding the White Stripes and their distinctive artistic identity.

In terms of the White Stripes' nebulous relationship to both genre and authenticity, I have utilized the work of authors such as Auslander, Bayles, and Filene to show how Jack White's performance of blues-based "musical truth" is a matter far more complicated than the simple emulation of his most well-loved musical influences. Contrasting White's interpretation of the genre with that of Eric Clapton and other so-called "white boy blues" artists, I have not only problematized the White Stripes' removal from this "self-indulgent" stream of the blues, but also examined the deliberately restrictive lengths to which they have gone in order to prove the value of their own artistic exploits.

The prominent interplay between kitsch and sincerity in the White Stripes' aesthetic has also proven to be a key factor in my evaluation of their peculiar artistic stance. On the one hand, we have seen how an assortment of blues-derived musical tropes (i.e. slide guitar, twelve-bar chord structure) and faithful adaptations of songs by Son House and Robert Johnson have placed the White Stripes' work squarely in the vein of Benjamin Filene's "cult of authenticity". On the other, through their outright refusal to

conform to standards of both image and musical style — not to mention White’s outright suggestion that authenticity is a “trap” and a “waste of everybody’s time” — the White Stripes’ deliberate immersion in a “cartoonish” and colour-coded presentation is one of the myriad ways in which they have subverted the validity of more traditional forms of rock and blues authenticity.

Using the work of cultural theorist, Jean Baudrillard, I have ultimately portrayed the White Stripes as the postmodern curators of a *realness* which proves that there is none. Through the duo’s multi-level simulation of both “authentic” sound and image, we have clearly seen how the White Stripes have constructed their own version of Baudrillard’s *hyperreality*, and utilized it to great effect in both the production and promotion of their music. Though it must also be noted how some of the band’s characteristics lend to the sense that Jack White is a manipulative, controlling misogynist (seen primarily through the White Stripes’ performances, musical arrangements, and the publicly visible relationship between Jack and Meg), it is important to realize that these issues are predominantly rooted in the patriarchal traditions of both rock and blues music, as well as in the old-fashioned cultural stance that the White Stripes have embraced in the context of their own work.

Moving forward from the insights I have offered above, an avenue for further study on the White Stripes would be to consider how the duo’s nostalgic attempts at “truth” and “authenticity” have been played out through their demonstrated preference for old-fashioned instrumental and recording technology. Beginning with scholarship such as Albin Zak’s *The Poetics of Rock* and Mark Katz’s *Capturing Sound*, the

exploration of this stance would provide a deeper understanding of the White Stripes' work, while also giving a greater indication as to where the duo stands within the context of rock music in the twenty-first century.

To conclude, I believe this project has demonstrated the type of value and musicological insight which can arise from the close, focused study of a single artist or band. Through the careful observation of how an artist such as Jack White operates both on and off the stage, we achieve a level of detail in our analyses which not only paves the way for a more nuanced understanding of the rock tradition, but also gives us crucial information as to how we can improve our own craft as musicologists.

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