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African Music Diaspora

Final Paper

Cultural Appropriation: Ed Sheeran

Introduction:

Ed Sheeran, like all musicians, inevitably borrows musical ideas from all sorts of songs and styles, the long history of white musicians exploiting black music requires us to assess Sheeran's deliberate musical house more critically. In this paper we will be focusing on Ed Sheeran's musical upbringing and how that has effected his writing and performance style, as well as taking a more detailed look at his song "Shape of You".

Ed Sheeran and Eminem:

Before diving into how Ed Sheeran has borrowed musical ideas from black music in the recent years, it is important to pinpoint on when this borrowing of black culture began. In Ed Sheeran's early childhood life he was often considered an outcast due to numerous things, but one of them being his stutter. At the age of nine his Dad had bought him *The Marshall Mathers LP by Eminem*, not knowing what was on it, but it had changed Ed's life. He had learned every word of the album and by the time I was ten, had learned the whole thing. Ed enjoyed how Eminem rapped very quickly, melodically and percussively. Through his continuous practicing of the album, he had ultimately gotten rid of his stutter. This is where Ed's love of percussive, melodic rap took place, and eventually

influenced his songwriting and performing style. This love for rap was the beginning of Ed's musical journey of borrowing musical ideas from black culture. Like many others before him such as Eminem, Benny Goodman, The Beatles, and The Beach Boys, Ed Sheeran would to become part of the list of white musicians who have exploited black musical cultures. *"Ed to be a bit of a rap artist has rap listeners sparked up and deciphered that Ed should not be doing this due to cultural appropriation. In other words, they believe that since Ed isn't from the same background as traditional rap artists and because of how he didn't start off as a rap artist that he doesn't have a right to do this. Cultural appropriation also says that it isn't right for people to "borrow" a piece of another culture because through the borrowing process the original meaning is lost."* (Archer) Ed's rap style is only one example of how he has exploited black culture, in his song "Shape of You" he not only borrows another primarily black musical style, but runs into a few copyright issues.

Shape Of You Musical Analysis:

The form of this song in my opinion is AABC:l D. The song is in C#m and repeats that same four chords over and over again: i (C#m) iv (F#m) bVI (A) bVII (B) . This repetitiveness of the same chords reminds me of the blues, and how the blues has a chord form that is typically not broken. Even though the chords are the same that song doesn't get old/boring, just like in the blues. Even though the chords remain the same, the song has a clear form and is catchy. The instrumental style is in the genre of modern day pop but has this *dancehall-tropical house* style over a marimba-fueled percussive beat. This

connects the song to Jamaican popular music, and its stylistic roots are derived from Reggae and R&B, and the percussive forms in the music are highly linked to Reggaeton and Hip Hop. This again is another example how Ed Sheeran has borrowed from Black culture. This borrowing of styles gives the song an island-like feel with a syncopated beat, typically referred to as the 'Rock Triplet' (as seen below)



Why did Ed Sheeran choose to make a song that is so highly influenced by black culture? He did this to be more marketable, to reach a broader audience. This is not the first time that a white artist has borrowed from black culture to reach a more culturally diverse audience. Elvis was know for this, he borrowed many of his vocal mannerisms from black blues and rock artists such as Little Richard. The Beatles often covered songs originally performed by Black Artists in order to reach broader audiences. Ed is simply doing the same thing here with this song. Ed is not the only modern day artist participating in this borrowing of black culture to increase popularity and expansion in fans. Justin Bieber is another example of a white artists borrowing rap, tropical house sounds to expand his audience. This cycle of white musicians exploiting black culture has gone on for decades, so Ed is just following the trend of his fellow ancestors. I'll end this

section from a quote from the Independent “*The BBC has been accused of producing “the saddest list in music history” after its black and urban music radio station 1Xtra produced a “power list” in which three out of the top four acts are white...The BBC as naming the “most important UK artists in the black and urban music scene” – was Ed Sheeran...whose music has combined elements of folk with hip-hop and grime. The highest-placed black artist was rapper Tinie Tempah, who came third – behind second-placed Disclosure, the white brothers Guy and Howard Lawrence, and just ahead of Sam Smith, the white son of a former City banker.*” (Independent)

Copyright Issues with Shape Of You:

When focusing on the vocals in this song, it is clear to see that there is an R&B influence due to the rhythms in the melody line. **Ed’s Shape of you:**

Musical notation for Ed Sheeran's "Shape of You" showing a melody line with lyrics and guitar chords. The chords are C#m, F#m, A, Bm, B, C#m, and F#m. The lyrics are: "Girl, you know I want your love. Your love was hand-made for some-bod-y like me. Come on, now, fol-low my lead."

TLC’s No Scrubs:

Musical notation for TLC's "No Scrubs" showing a chorus with guitar chords and piano accompaniment. The chords are C#m7, G#m, D#7, and G#m. The lyrics are: "no, I don't want no scrub. A scrub is a guy that can't get no love from".

The lyrical rhythm, pitches and underlying harmony are the same in both songs. TLC's song "No Scrubs" (a classic R&B pop song) chorus melody is very noticeable in the Ed's pre-chorus line. Ed Sheeran had not only borrowed from black culture in this song with they production and style bit had also stolen pieces from another highly influential R&B song by black artists. Yet again another example of how this history of white musicians stealing from black culture is still present today. Another example pretty similar to this is the The Beach Boy's *Surfing USA* and Chuck Berry's *Sweet Sixteen*. Let's take a look at the two. **Surfing USA:**

Moderately fast

CHUCK BERRY

If ev - 'ry - bod - y had an
o - cean route a - cross the U. S. we're gon - na take real soon.

Oo, oo.

then ev - 'ry - bod - y'd be surf - ing down our surf - boards. like Cal - i - for - ni - a. we can't wait for June.

Oo.

Moderately ♩ = 166

N.C.

I. They're real - ly rock - in' in
Bos - ton, and Pitts - burgh P. A. deep in the heart of Tex -
(Verses 3, 4 & 5 see additional lyrics)

Slightly muted

- as, and round the 'Fris - co bay. All o - ver Saint

It is clear to see that both songs are exactly the same, just like Shape of You's Pre-Chorus and TLC's chorus. *"The California boys often incorporated rock & roll pioneer Chuck Berry's songs into their early concerts. But 1958's "Sweet Little Sixteen" set Beach Boys' composer Brian Wilson into overdrive. Inspired by Berry's rapid-fire references to various American cities, he recast the song as a paean to a fun-in-the-sun sport. Wilson penned a new set of lyrics listing off the hot surfing locales across the Pacific coast. Wilson said he intended the song as a tribute to the rock guitarist, but Berry's lawyers used another term: plagiarism. The Verdict, with the threat of lawsuits looming, Beach Boys manager—and Brian Wilson's father—Murry Wilson agreed to give the publishing rights to Arc Music, Berry's publisher. However, Berry's name wouldn't appear on the songwriting credits until 1966. Although the genre was built on a handful of standard three-chord progressions and blues licks, the "Surfin' U.S.A." incident was one of the first major plagiarism scuffles in rock history."* (Rolling Stones). This then leads to how Ed Sheeran had taken care of his song with the writers of TLC's No Scrubs. Thankfully unlike the Beach Boys, once the issue came to Ed's attention he immediately and gladly gave the writers the credit and included them as songwriters on the track.

Conclusion:

History is known to repeat itself over and over again. White artists have always borrowed from black culture, and for the longest time were not giving credit from the inspiration behind it all. Black history and music has greatly effected our music industry today. So

how do we move forward with this on-going inevitable issue of the exploitation of black culture by white artists? I guess the only thing we can do is give credit where it is due. Be aware of our past, and how we borrow other cultures. Will this prevent all problems with this vast sharing of black culture? I certainly think not, but we can try to remember and credit the artists in which we are inspired from, and try to get more African American artists into the mainstream industry that has always been dominated by White artists performing their cultural roots and musical styles.

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