

1968: A Global Perspective

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Divergent Directions in Popular Music: James Brown and the Beatles

Rock and roll, once clearly associated with a rhythm-and-blues background bred from African-American roots, had split off into many directions by the late 1960s. On one hand, the Beatles were at the height of their global visibility. In 1968 they released their self-titled album, a postmodern collage of many different styles of music. Known as *The White Album*, this record marked a very experimental stage in the Beatles' career. The wide variety of songs, from classical to avant-garde, reflects both the experiences of their trip to India and their tendency to push the boundaries of sound and recording techniques. At the same time, James Brown was moving his career in a particularly "funky" musical direction. Brown is often credited with preventing national riots due to his televised performance immediately following Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968, and his release of "Say It Loud - I'm Black and I'm Proud" later the same year further strengthened his association with black nationalist politics. These two musical moments indicate a crucial junction in the racial politics of rock and roll. Using live concert footage and music samples, this presentation will demonstrate how the black roots of rock and roll were almost completely obscured by the experimental sounds of the Beatles, while James Brown purposely asserted the black heritage of his music through his politics and funky sound. These two unique takes on rock and roll in one particular historical moment demonstrate the different directions popular music was moving in the late 1960s.