

“take[s] my money when I’m in need” and is a “triflin’ friend indeed,” The Legendary K.O.’s song is a lyrical and profane condemnation of the response to Katrina by both the government and the media. Here is a sample:

Five days in this motherf__ attic
 Can’t use the cellphone I keep getting static
 Dying ’cause they lying instead of telling us the truth
 Other day the helicopters got my neighbors off the roof
 Screwed ’cause they say they coming back for us too
 That was three days ago, I don’t see no rescue
 See a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do
 Since God made the path that I’m trying to walk through
 Swam to the store, tryin’ to look for food
 Corner store’s kinda flooded so I broke my way through
 I got what I could but before I got through
 News say the police shot a black man trying to loot
 (Who!?) Don’t like black people
 George Bush don’t *like* black people
 George Bush don’t *like* black people

This chapter is the story of that song. “George Bush Doesn’t Care About Black People” is the end (for the moment) of a line of musical borrowing. That borrowing extends far beyond Kanye West’s song “Gold Digger.” “Gold Digger” is memorable largely because it in turn borrows from an even older song, a very famous one written half a century before and hailed by many as the birth of soul music. It is in the origins of *that* song that we will start the trail.

I GOT A WOMAN

In 1955, Ray Charles Robinson, better known as Ray Charles, released a song called “I Got a Woman.” It was a defining moment in Charles’s musical development. Early in his career he had unashamedly modeled himself on Nat King Cole.

I knew back then that Nat Cole was bigger than ever. Whites could relate to him because he dealt with material they understood, and he did so with great feeling. Funny thing, but during all these years I was imitating Nat Cole, I never thought twice about it, never felt bad about copying the cat’s licks. To me it was practically a science. I worked at it, I enjoyed it, I was proud of it, and I loved doing it. He was a guy everyone admired, and it just made sense to me, musical and commercial sense, to study his technique. It was something like when a young lawyer—just out of school—respects an older lawyer. He tries to get inside his mind, he studies to

see how he writes up all his cases, and he's going to sound a whole lot like the older man—at least till he figures out how to get his own shit together. Today I hear some singers who I think sound like me. Joe Cocker, for instance. Man, I know that cat must sleep with my records. But I don't mind. I'm flattered; I understand. After all, I did the same thing.³

In the early 50s Charles decided that he needed to move away from Cole's style and find his own sound, "sink, swim or die." But as with any musician, "his own sound" was the product of a number of musical traditions—blues and gospel particularly. It is out of those traditions that "I Got a Woman" emerged; indeed it is that combination that causes it to be identified as one of the birthplaces of soul music.

According to the overwhelming majority of sources, "I Got a Woman" stems from a fairly overt piece of musical borrowing—Charles reworded the hymn "Jesus Is All the World to Me"—sometimes referred to as "My Jesus Is All the World to Me."

Musically, soul denotes styles performed by and for black audiences according to past musical practices reinterpreted and redefined. During its development, three performers played significant roles in shaping its sound, messages, and performance practice: Ray Charles, James Brown, and Aretha Franklin. If one can pinpoint a moment when gospel and blues began to merge into a secular version of gospel song, it was in 1954 when Ray Charles recorded "My Jesus Is All the World to Me," changing its text to "I Got A Woman."⁴

That story is repeated in the biography on Charles's Web site. "Charles reworded the gospel tune 'Jesus Is All the World to Me' adding deep church inflections to the secular rhythms of the nightclubs, and the world was never the same."⁵ Michael Lydon, Charles's most impressive biographer, simply reports that "Jesus Is All the World to Me" is described as the song's origin in another published source,⁶ and this origin is cited repeatedly elsewhere in books, newspaper articles, and online,⁷ though the most detailed accounts also mention Renald Richard, Charles's trumpeter, who is credited with co-writing the song.⁸

To secular ears, "Jesus Is All the World to Me" is a plodding piece of music with a mechanical, up-and-down melodic structure. It conjures up a bored (and white) church audience, trudging through the verses, a semitone flat, while thinking about Sunday lunch rather than salvation. It is about as far removed as one could be from the syncopated beat and amorous subject matter of "I Got a Woman." The hymn was the product of Will Lamartine

Thompson—a severe-looking fellow with a faint resemblance to an elderly Doc Holliday—who died in 1909 and is buried in the same place he was born, East Liverpool, Ohio. But the words have an earnestness to them that gives life to the otherwise uninspired verse.

Jesus is all the world to me, my life, my joy, my all;
 He is my strength from day to day, without Him I would fall.
 When I am sad, to Him I go, no other one can cheer me so;
 When I am sad, He makes me glad, He's my Friend.

Reading those words, one can understand the sincerity that made Mr. Thompson spurn commercial publishers for his devotional music, instead founding his own publishing house (also in East Liverpool) to make sure that his hymns reached the people. I can quote as much of the song as I want without worrying about legal consequences because the copyright on Mr. Thompson's lyrics has expired. So has the copyright over the music. The song was published in 1904. Copyright had only been extended to musical compositions in 1881. Like all copyrights back then, copyright over music lasted for only twenty-eight years, with a possible extension for another fourteen. If Ray Charles did indeed reword it fifty years later, he was doing nothing illegal. It had been in the public domain for at least eight years, and probably for twenty. Now maybe Charles's genius was to hear in this hymn, or in a syncopated gospel version of this hymn, the possibility of a fusion of traditions which would itself become a new tradition—soul. Or perhaps his genius was in knowing a good idea—Richard's—when he heard it, and turning that idea into the beginnings of its own musical genre.

Soul is a fusion of gospel on the one hand and rhythm and blues on the other. From gospel, soul takes the call-and-response pattern of preacher and congregation and the wailing vocals of someone “testifying” to their faith. From rhythm and blues it takes the choice of instruments, some of the upbeat tempo, and the distinctly worldly and secular attitude to the (inevitable) troubles of life. Musicologists delight in parsing the patterns of influence further; R&B itself had roots in “jump music” and the vocal style of the “blues shouters” who performed with the big bands. It also has links to jazz. Gospel reaches back to spirituals and so on.

As with all music, those musical traditions can be traced back or forward in time, the net of influence and borrowing widening as one goes in either direction. In each, one can point to distinctive musical motifs—the chords of the twelve-bar blues, or the flattened fifth in bebop. But musical traditions are