

Revolutionizing Punk:  
Too Black To Live, Too Queer To Die

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*Too Fast to Live, Too Young to Die* is an exhibition at the Museum of Art and Design (MAD) that features items relating to Punk graphics from the US and the UK. The show originated at the Cranbrook Art Museum, and was curated by Andrew Blauvelt, with items from the collection of Andrew Krivine. Although the exhibition has over 400 items in it, not included the table full of buttons, after interviewing MAD curatorial assistant Alida Jekabson who helped to bring this show to MAD, I felt especially drawn to an album cover, *Slave to the Rhythm* by Grace Jones. It caught my eye because I saw a Black female face in a wall full of white male faces. It made me question why there was such a lack of diversity in a movement that came after the civil and women's rights movements.

The album cover was designed by Jean-Paul Goude, an iconic graphic designer from France. Goude was also a long term life and creative partner of Grace Jones, and has a son with her. The first 30 seconds of the music video for the album's title song, "Slave to the Rhythm," reveals the process of creating the cover. Goude starts off with one image of Grace Jones with her mouth open. Jones appears to be yelling. Goude uses appropriation by way of collage to create the cover, which according to Andrew Blauvelt, means that "bits of preexisting materials or parts of photographs are glued together to form a new image, is a particularly modern technique..."<sup>1</sup> In the video, Goude begins to draw lines over Jones' mouth and cuts out slivers of her mouth from different copies of the same picture. Then he puts them all together to create the effect of a roar.

I consider the title to *Slave to the Rhythm* to be ironic not only because Jones is a Black woman, but because she strayed away from the normal "rhythm" of women. She dressed, acted,

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Blauvelt, "The Appropriated Image," in *Too Fast to Live, Too Young to Die*, Publication in conjunction with an exhibition held at the Museum of Art and Design, from April 9, 2019--August 18, 2019. (New York: Museum of Art and Design, 2019).

and portrayed herself differently than other women. She wanted men to be frightened by her image, so that she knew that the only men who stepped to her rhythm were the good ones. Many cultural critics consider this album a biography. I would argue that the album uses appropriative strategies for all its song lyrics. According to Blauvelt, “The visual strategy of appropriation, the art of borrowing preexisting images, became an emblematic trope of contemporary art in the late 1970s and 1980s...”<sup>2</sup> Although it is not visual, if you listen to each song on the album, the phrase “to the rhythm” can be found in each track. Additionally, all the songs play excerpts of interviews between Jones and Paul Morley, the cofounder of the company that produced her album. In *Slave to the Rhythm*, Jones’ appropriative strategy was a productive means to integrate preexisting lyrics and audio clips to make a whole album.

The album cover to *Slave to the Rhythm*, in addition to Grace Jones’ other album covers, was iconic because it defied the norms of Punk. She was a Black woman, which stood in contrast to the lack of diversity across the board in the movement where there were few women in Punk, and even fewer people of color. One notable band was Living Colour, a rock band comprised of Black men. Living Colour has a song called “Cult” which really expands on the lack of people of color in such an iconic genre. As Tavia Nyong’o observes, “*Cult* spoke to the dilemmas of being a black person awash in a sea of white. The song managed to perform black historical memory in a ‘white’ idiom, while simultaneously undertaking an immanent critique of black identity.”<sup>3</sup> Jimi Hendrix is also a notable Black Punk artist, but he was also referred to as a “nigga” by Patti Smith. Due to the fact that most Black people at that time had established the fight for their civil

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<sup>2</sup> Blauvelt, *Too Fast to Live, Too Young to Die*.

<sup>3</sup> Tavia Nyong’o, “Rip It Up: The Black Experience in Rock 'n' Roll, and: Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race, and: Afropunk: The "Rock 'n' Roll Nigger," *TDR: The Drama Review* 50, no. 1 (2006): p.183.

rights, everyone was still in what I identify as a “colonized mindset.” After many years of seeing people face oppression due to their skin tone, Americans remained stuck in the roles of the “colonizer” and “colonized.” Microaggressions, white supremacy, and any form of racism that exists and negatively affects the progress of people of color, are all activities that reinforce this relationship. Fred Smith, a Black guitarist of Beefeater, noted that “It was very strange to be these "token" negroes, playing in front of predominantly all white audiences, but we did it...I heard Shawn Brown being referred to as "the negro version of Ian MacKaye...In retrospect, even in this new scene, I was always wondering, would racism ever end?!”<sup>4</sup> Black people in a field full of Whites were essentially seen as impersonators and imitators.

Grace Jones lived several intersecting identities as a Black, queer, immigrant woman which made it so much harder for her to succeed. Throughout her career, Grace Jones refused to categorize her style and music under a single genre. In fact, her punk style appears intertwined with Camp. According to Alida Jekabson, a curatorial assistant at the Museum of Art and Design, “You know, being able to--and this is another aspect of performativity--but literally wearing your opinion on your sleeve. You know, no one has to ask you what you believe in because it's very clear from the way that you look like what you are associated with, which is really, it's intense...”<sup>5</sup> I would assert that Grace Jones’ aesthetic exemplifies the Camp X Punk style. Camp X Punk style is basically a combination of Camp fashion, characterized by theatricality, and Punk creativity. To echo Jekabson, to look like what you are associated with can be intense, which is exactly what Grace Jones did. Jones’ ability to plainly recognize the many facets of her identity reflects the words of Coco Chanel, a French fashion pioneer, who

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<sup>4</sup> David Ensminger, "Coloring Between the Lines of Punk and Hardcore: From Absence to Black Punk Power.", *Postmodern Culture* 20, Number 2 (2010)

<sup>5</sup> Alida Jekabson, Interviewed by the author, Digital Recording, New York City, NY, July 23, 2019

once said, “Women should dress as plainly as their maids.”<sup>6</sup> Eric Darnell Pritchard reflects, “One would be hard pressed to find a person who self- identifies or is identified as subcultural or countercultural—especially one who is historically informed, pop culture inclined, black, queer, feminist, punk, or otherwise obsessively aesthete—who would not count Jones or one of her iconic moments in one or more aspects of their senses, as essential.”<sup>7</sup> Andrew Bolton, the head curator of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, further asserts, “Camp has been framed as a particular sensibility, taste, style, or aesthetic; it has been understood as historical and social practice, as cultural economy...And yet, Camp has not given up its relentless power to frustrate any effort to pinpoint it.”<sup>8</sup> As with Camp, Grace Jones' style cannot be pinpointed and she used this to her benefit.

To Jekabson Punk is easily recognizable: „ „...Punk to me was the.. spiked hair...But I would say that I still have this, a little bit more stereotyped “understanding” ”...”<sup>9</sup> But this was not Grace Jones, because she did not have spiked hair, she was not a white man, she did not fit into this stereotype. According to *The Pitchfork Review*, “Her image celebrated blackness and subverted gender norms...a woman who was lithe, sexy, and hyperfeminine while also exuding a ribald, butch swagger. In 1979, *Ebony* got her je ne sais quoi exactly right: ‘Grace Jones is a question mark followed by an exclamation point.’”<sup>10</sup> Grace Jones stands out as a person of color,

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<sup>6</sup> Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992): p. 57.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Darnell Pritchard, “Grace Jones, Afro Punk, and Other Fierce Provocations: An Introduction to “Sartorial Politics, Intersectionality, and Queer Worldmaking,”” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, Volume 4, Number 3 (2017): p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Bolton et al., *Camp: Notes on Fashion* (New York City, NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2019): p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> Jekabson, Interviewed by the author, July 23, 2019

<sup>10</sup> Barry Walters, “As Much As I Can, As Black As I Am: The Queer History of Grace Jones,” *The Pitchfork Review*, Summer 2015.

a female, and someone who created their own punk style. To be honest, I'm not quite sure how to define her style being that you can't really define Camp, but I would consider it to be

I would assert that the album cover, *Slave to the Rhythm*, has a great design because of how much it makes her identities stand out, and how many different interpretations offered by the image. . I am not alone in wishing that the exhibit at MAD featured more people of color; Jekabson reflects that she has“ gotten questions about representation of female designers, musicians of color, and female musicians in the show, and I think that really traces back to that this is a collection show.”<sup>11</sup> By which she means that the exhibit reflects materials collected by an individual, Andrew Krivine. However, today, Punk has become diversified a bit more. Pritchard observes that Grace Jones set a standard, especially “when she, then sixty- seven years old, takes to the Afro Punk stage top- less, covered in drawings in white body paint, a white wig and headdress, black lipstick and eyeshadow, a cape, and hula hoop.”<sup>12</sup> The United States now has a vibrant Afropunk festival featuring artists like Grace Jones, SZA, and Solange.

I think design relies heavily on the audience to whom it speaks. . However, everyone's interpretation of a design should be specific to their own opinions and feelings. I believe that Grace Jones, and the album cover for *Slave to the Rhythm*, are iconic. She portrays diversity in a field where its not shown consistently. Grace Jones, along with other female artists and punks of color, really shaped the way for Punk to become even more diverse today. Grace Jones was also able to bring elements of Camp into Punk, and this has positively impacted the way Queer people of color identify themselves today.

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<sup>11</sup> Jekabson, Interviewed by the author, July 23, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Pritchard, “Grace Jones, Afro Punk, and Other Fierce Provocations: An Introduction to "Sartorial Politics, Intersectionality, and Queer Worldmaking",” p.2.

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# Images

