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Words Matter

By Richard Khuzami

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When I hear the words "cultural appropriation," I worry that we are building a wall. I am a musician. For most of my life I have played percussion from the Middle East and the Mediterranean, music that was already old when I found it, shaped over a thousand years as one people handed its rhythms to the next along the trade routes.

Before starting, I'd like to acknowledge something we artists are all well aware of: the exploitation of artists, and of whole cultures, is real. Their labor gets taken, their credit erased, their work sold out from under them, and it is one of the genuine injustices of our time. My issue is not with the fight to eliminate exploitation. It is with a single word, "appropriation," we have chosen to fight it with, a word that can be poison to the very partnerships we are trying to build.

The phrase is everywhere now. You can throw it at almost anyone: the cook who borrows a spice, the kid who falls for a music that wasn't handed to him at birth. It is meant to sound like justice. Too often it works like a wall, telling people that certain songs and flavors are private property, no trespassing. Put that wall up a century ago and it would have strangled nearly every art form we treasure. American music is our closest thing to a national miracle, and it was born of collision: West African rhythm met European harmony, the blues ran into country, every immigrant carried the



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songs of home. Name a genre, from jazz to hip-hop, and you have named a fusion.

Music is only the example I know best. Our theater grew out of Greek tragedy. Our numerals are Arabic. Our sciences rest on foundations laid in Baghdad and Alexandria. Everything we hold sacred, some earlier civilization handed us and we improved. That is the whole record of human progress, and none of it was theft. Even a child is two lineages fused into something new, and we call that creation, not stealing. Culture is no different.

So where is the real wrong? In the powerful exploiting the vulnerable, a predator who does not care what culture you come from. We have simply given it the wrong name.

Look at my own industry. Yes, there is the familiar picture of the old Black bluesman whose song made a white star rich. Little Richard said he signed away the publishing on "Tutti Frutti" for fifty dollars and half a cent a record. That robbery was real. But stop there and you have told yourself a story about race, and missed the point, because the very star who supposedly stole from those bluesmen was robbed too. Elvis Presley's manager took a quarter of his earnings for years, then raised his cut to half of much of what came after. Lou Pearlman built the Backstreet Boys and *NSYNC out of clean-cut suburban kids*, paid NSYNC thirty-five dollars a day, and wrote himself into their contracts as an equal, extra member. The



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unscrupulous do not care about your color or your age. The thread is the strong taking from the weak and keeping the credit and the cash.

That is exploitation, and it deserves our outrage. "Cultural appropriation" shrinks that abuse of power down to a squabble over who may wear or cook or play what. It cannot tell the producer who cheats an artist apart from the teenager who simply fell in love with a sound, the love that, given time, turns that teenager into an artist herself. Shame that first love and you kill the artist in the cradle. You aim the anger at the fan and the creator while the machine that actually robs the artist keeps right on working.

There is a habit here worth naming. We reach for the most shocking word we can find, mistake the jolt for moral clarity, and watch it blow up in our hands. "Defund the police" was meant as reform and became a club for the other side, costing us the reform and the argument. "Abolish ICE" is aimed at an agency that needs fixing, not erasing. "Appropriation" is that same mistake in a new suit: we mean exploitation, but we pick a word that hits fans and artists and lets the real thief walk. Indict the wrong person and you lose more than the vote. You lose the people you needed to win.

My own Lebanese background, and the sharing of our music and culture, has been my life's focus. There is no higher compliment than someone wanting to learn our traditions and incorporate them into their own. It has never felt like robbery when they do. It felt like a handshake, and we could use more handshakes, along with a clearer sense of who the real thieves are. The urge to fence off culture sounds protective, but underneath it is



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suspicion. It trains us to see a thief where there is a student, and to miss the actual thief at the desk with the contract. I would rather live in the world my music comes from, where a Greek dance and an Arabic scale and an African drum meet on one stage and make something none of them could have made alone. That is not appropriation. That is civilization.

The music never asked permission, and it never should. But it should always be paid its due.

Source notes

For the editor; not intended for publication and not included in the word count. Every factual claim in the piece is sourced below, including two places where a widely repeated figure could not be traced to a primary record and is attributed as a claim rather than stated as fact.

1. Little Richard, "Tutti Frutti," fifty dollars.

The fifty-dollar figure is Little Richard's own account, given to his authorized biographer Charles White and repeated in press coverage since. No contract has been made public, so the piece attributes it to him ("Little Richard said") rather than stating it as established fact. The fifty dollars bought the publishing rights, not the song itself, which is co-credited to Dorothy LaBostrie. A later account describes the arrangement as granting the label ownership in exchange for a half-cent-per-record royalty.

<https://www.okayplayer.com/a-brief-history-of-the-predatory-record-deal/385171>

<https://jolt.law.harvard.edu/assets/articlePDFs/v383/4-Mtima.pdf>

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/music/story/2022-04-17/art-rupe-specialty-records-little-richard-dies-at-104>

2. Colonel Tom Parker's commission on Elvis Presley's earnings.

Parker's standard management commission was twenty-five percent. His letter of January 2, 1967 states that the regular twenty-five percent commission would remain on flat payments, with a fifty-fifty split applying to overages and profit participations. The Presley estate's later complaint alleged that the higher split applied to a substantial portion of income. The text reflects that two-stage structure rather than a flat fifty percent.

<https://preslaw.info/management-contract-between-col-tom-parker-elvis-presley-1967-amendment>



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<https://preslaw.info/complaint-filed-by-the-presley-estate-against-colonel-tom-parker-extracts>

3. Lou Pearlman, thirty-five dollars a day.

The thirty-five-dollars-a-day figure comes from Lance Bass and applies to *NSYNC. Pearlman did take an equal member's share; the members have described being blindsided by terms they had already signed rather than the arrangement being hidden from the public. The piece says he "wrote himself into their contracts as an equal, extra member," which the sources support.

<https://abcnews.com/US/lou-pearlman-backstreet-boys-nsync-lure-people-massive/story?id=67630954>
<https://www.businessinsider.com/lou-pearlman-boy-bands-singers-list-nsync-backstreet-boys-2024-7>
<https://people.com/aj-mclean-says-backstreet-boys-blindsided-by-former-manager-lou-pearlman-8683565>

4. Courtney Love, forty million dollars.

There was no testimony. The forty-million and two-million figures come from Love's 2001 countersuit against Universal, reported as her claim that the label made about forty million dollars from Hole's album sales while she and the band collected about two million in royalties. The case settled with no court finding. The text describes it as a lawsuit claim.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/courtney-love-settles-lawsuit/>
https://www.salon.com/2000/06/14/love_7/

5. Raymond Chandler on Hollywood.

Chandler's phrase in "Writers in Hollywood," The Atlantic, November 1945, is "credit-stealing." The full clause reads: "an endless contention of tawdry egos ... almost none of them capable of anything much more creative than credit-stealing and self-promotion." The text uses his actual word and attributes it to him, without quotation marks.

<https://screenwritingfromiowa.wordpress.com/2013/01/21/writers-in-hollywood-raymond-chandler/>
<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/requiem-dream-0/>