

Season 1 Episode 3: "Mood Music for the Revolution"

Matthew: [00:00:00] Today, we'll be having a conversation with Allison about music for the Black Lives Matter movement. Let's rock and roll.

Allison: [00:00:07] Okay. So, um, I guess I'll just start by, like, reading out the question, just so you guys can be, like, reminded of what this whole thing is about. So, this is "Mood Music for the Revolution", the Black Lives Matter edition. So, I basically just wanted to talk about some songs that encourage understanding of multiple Black narratives in America and help popularize these narratives and get them so that everyone can understand them from the perspective of music. So, the questions are: How has the movement for Black lives, from [the] Civil Rights Era to now with the Black Lives Matter movement, shifted narratives through generations? And how has the music we partake in reflect or even influence how these narratives shift? We can just start by going through the songs from earlier eras. I guess these songs, in my opinion, one main theme I got was that they're a lot more straightforward, whereas I think that the songs that Gen Z and millennials typically listen to are more kind of blunt, and that's probably just a result of, like, the difference in genre, 'cause, like, hip-hop was created in the eighties and then the songs that we're listening to from earlier time periods are definitely more of soul and jazz and blues. So I think that hip-hop really did allow for a more outspoken way to create music. So, yeah. Um, is there any specific song you guys want to talk about? Any songs that stood out to you, any themes that you pulled out of the listening?

Karen: [00:01:44] Did anyone else find that "Strange Fruit" and "Black Rage" had a lot of, like, vocal techniques that overlapped Lauryn Hill? Well, first of all, she's taking the melody from "My Favorite Things," which has been done by John Coltrane. So, it has that history. And then when I was listening to it, it was after I had re-listened to "Strange Fruit" and it just had that same, like, execution in, I mean, I'm not, I'm not familiar or too familiar with vocal techniques, but it had that same type of execution in, um, like...attack, I guess. And it really, like, it makes the song so much more effective.

Allison: [00:02:31] Hmm. Yeah. Yeah. I definitely feel that, like, both Lauryn Hill and, uh, Billie Holiday just have so much power in their voices and I think that's what makes the song so iconic, I guess. "**Black Rage**" is definitely not as widely known of a song as "**Strange Fruit**," but they both definitely do carry a lot of weight. Specifically, when listening to "**Strange Fruit**," I tried to pay attention to the lyrics, but the lyrics are just so like, they're, they're so painful to me that it's really hard to continue listening to it. It's very disturbing because the song is obviously about the fight against lynching. With this song, the lyrics, if you're just kind of listening to it and not really paying attention, you might be a little confused and you're like, what does "strange fruit" mean? And then once you think about it, you're like, *Oh*, like how in the article, I think it was the NPR article, it was saying that, um, there was no encore and the room was Black. It's just very, like, it's so deep that you don't really know how to react to it. And I think that in that way, "**Strange Fruit**" is different [from] some of these other songs that I put on here on the list for earlier time periods. Like, for example, Stevie Wonder's "**Living for the City**." Definitely just a very, very groovy song. Like, I could just dance to it all day and it, like, gets a lot of radio play as well as, um, "**What's Going On**" by Marvin Gaye. So I think that, like, the fact that those two songs get, like, more radio play in comparison to, other songs that are, like, radical, it shows that they are very, like, able to be disguised as just, like, dance songs or just like songs that you would just, like, like to listen to. Whereas they don't have like, a super clear, like, radical meaning.

Torrey: [00:04:30] I know that, um, that for "**Living for the City**," the radio edit, um, doesn't include the talking portion where the character gets arrested and that kind of just adds to your point that they even took out that portion that maybe would have been too radical or too obviously about something. And so I just thought of that when you were talking about that. And I think that really adds to your point about them changing for the radio or making it more, like, palatable.

Allison: [00:05:01] Yeah, definitely. Also, "**Living for the City**" and "**What's Going On**," they're songs that I very much so grew up listening to. So, I would just, like, be in the car on my way to school and hear these songs and wouldn't really think about it. And now that I'm a lot older, it's very

interesting to see how as a child, I could just very easily overlook the deeper meaning behind these songs.

Matthew: [00:05:27] I was going to point out specifically with these two songs, like how they kind of represent the danger of in, in trying to get a message across to white audiences, Black artists had to kind of censor themselves in some ways, you know, to make it, to make it palatable. It's like, *Oh, it's kind of fun to listen to*, and all this stuff. Whereas "**Strange Fruit**" is, like, not fun to listen to at all, but that, what, what happens is you run the risk of then just being appropriated in the same way that like "All Lives Matter", you know, white moms on, on Instagram are, you always see them like, *well, Martin Luther King Jr. said this, and Martin Luther King Jr. said this*. It's like, *yeah, but he also wrote the letter from Birmingham Jail*. You know, like all this stuff that's like, in trying to get across to white audiences, you have to kind of temper yourselves, but then you run the risk of just being appropriated into some other narrative that obviously Marvin Gaye was not interested in supporting.

Allison: [00:06:23] Yeah. I feel like that even speaks to the point of how a lot of these artists, their labels really didn't want them to create radical songs and it just points out a difference to music that's being released now. Um, I don't really know too much about it, but I feel like either labels are becoming more accepting of artists who have radical views, or we just have a lot more independent artists, you know?

Liv: [00:06:51] Yeah. I just wanted to take us back to "**Strange Fruit**" for a second. Part of what makes that song so upsetting for me is the juxtaposition of imagery. So yeah, for each of the songs, I sort of pulled a lyric that I found especially resonant. I'll just read the one that I pulled for "**Strange Fruit**," if that's all right. It was, "Pastoral scene of the Gallant South / The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth / Scent of Magnolia, sweet and fresh / Then the sudden smell of burning flesh." So, in the first and third lyrics, it's this, it's the idealized image of what the South, what America is. And then in the second and fourth lines, it's revealing the horrors underneath. And that is sort of what I got from a lot of the older songs that you put on the syllabus, sort of just laying bare the suffering and the mistreatment. And then, the more modern songs are sort of a call to action based on that and I just found that particularly effective. The artists who

were really showcasing, *this is what you think is going on*. This is what you think it's like, and this is how it actually is. So, the, the contrast I found to be especially effective.

Allison: [00:08:13] I definitely also found in "**Strange Fruit**" is kind of, like a, more, like, hidden message thing where I think the listener just has to be able to decipher what the meaning is. And I like how you said that the more modern songs are like a call to action, 'cause that's like, that's exactly what it is. I think the language is put in a very straightforward and, like, bold way. And maybe that's just because as a younger generation, that's just how we speak, probably a result of, like, social media, honestly. So yeah, actually we can move on to the more modern songs, I think, now, and then we can go back and compare more if we wanted to. Just briefly talking about "FDT," we don't really need to talk about this song because it's very straightforward, but I just wanted to mention it because I think it's just so interesting how this song has become such an icon of like, the Black Lives Matter movement. Like, literally, if you go to any protest, you will hear this song being played. And I think it really just helps us become comfortable with calling out what specifically is wrong in America. And I think that, like, in no songs before the eighties, before NWA, any of that, would they have specifically, like, called out any people in power. And I think that's really, like, "FDT" is just a really good example of how this generation is able to just so boldly speak their minds. Yeah, I just love it. And we already talked about "**Black Rage**" a little bit, but I wanted to point out, so the lyrics that I wrote down that really stood out to me was "Two thirds of a person / Rapings and beatings and suffering that worsen / Black human packages tied up in strings." I feel like these lyrics are so graphic and, yeah, in the past, you can talk about like, *Oh, we're suffering, picket lines and picket signs*, but it's not really, it's not really, you haven't seen artists say rapings and beatings in a song and it's just so graphic. It brings about that call to action and that realization that this is actually what's happening and we're not going to be, like, quiet about it anymore. And I just think this song is so interesting today, because it's explaining what Black rage is. But with the current movement, I feel like this song could just be called "Rage" because it's like Black Lives Matter, the movement isn't just being, isn't just being led by Black people, you know? And so I feel like this song is really great because it resonates with so many people within Gen Z and younger millennials, because it's just so true.

Karen: [00:11:29] I think it was the Gen Z perspective on Black Lives Matter article where it talks about, and I think that this is kind of what you're getting at, about how, like, the reason why Gen Z at least is so forthcoming and just gets to the point is because they grew up in a post-9/11 world with, with, you know, school shootings being a regular thing and that whole environment. And then, in addition to that, social media and more of that whole social environment where constant injustices were happening and there were platforms to discuss it. So now there's like, rather than putting in illusions in music, it's just, there's the confidence to just speak up and be loud as to what you were saying. I think it's that article.

Allison: [00:12:28] Definitely. I think you're absolutely right. And I think social media is a huge part of us experiencing and witnessing injustices, literal murders on social media. And I think because we're, we have such easy access to just injustices and that just really causes us to be like, we can't just like keep allowing this to happen because it's just, it's just like, it's reality to us. It's, like, we can't detach ourselves from these things that are happening every day, because we can see it so easily. And that also relates to "**Mama's Baby**" by Orion Sun. Um, she keeps saying, "It don't affect me," and I think that really draws out how a lot of people, this generation, definitely, we, we can't say that it doesn't affect us because it does. And I also think that when she says "It don't affect me," it's almost mocking those who feel privileged enough to detach themselves from realities of police brutality and police murder, because if you can see brutality and murder with your own eyes, there should be no way that you are just comfortable with it. So yeah, this song is definitely a call to action to people who are just allowing their privilege to detach themselves from reality. Moving on, so do you guys, like, do you understand the beef that happened between Noname and J. Cole? Or did you guys hear about it, like prior? I think it's, honestly, it's kind of funny to me. Um, I didn't, I like, put "**Snow On Tha Bluff**" as like a sub category under "**Song 33**" because I don't think that J. Cole, like, needs to be speaking right now at all. But I think a really important narrative that I'm getting from "**Song 33**" and "**Snow On Tha Bluff**" is this narrative of all Black lives matter, which is something that's very new. And I do understand that a lot of people have had trouble understanding what all Black lives matter means. But these two songs just completely, like, explain it like so well. In "**Song 33**", she says, *one girl missing, another one going missing, but these men quiet as a church mouse*. So that's really just, like, speaking to the fact that

J. Cole released his song right around the time that Toyin was murdered. She disappeared and then she was sexually assaulted, and she spoke up about it and she was murdered. And J. Cole has the audacity at the end to be like, he said, can you walk with me and fill me with wisdom? And so he's telling her, he's speaking to Noname, basically, and saying, *teach me, teach me how to be better*. Even though he comes off as a person who is educated and woke, he's like, *teach me how to be better, because you really know how to be the perfect advocate for the Black Lives Matter movement*. And I think that this whole thing just, like, goes back to my point of how songs that are released in this day and age are just so blunt, and they are just going to tell you straight up. And I think it's really interesting how we are able to see straight into personal lives rather than just, like, a broad view of, like, what the movement is. And I think it's really important to go deeper in and really focus on the fact that all Black lives matter and that Black Lives Matter has typically been fighting for the male Black life. And we need to focus on other marginalized groups within Black lives as well. And I think just lyrically, the songs were really able to do that very well.

Liv: [00:16:57] I was just wondering if you had any thoughts about, or wanted to talk about at all, um, any connections with the Black arts movement? So from like '65 to '75, it seems that there are a lot of parallels in the aesthetics of what we're seeing now and what the artists of that time were going for then, even though it was mostly literature and poetry, but they were drawing a lot from jazz and from traditional African music and from African folklore and just really aiming to dismantle white influence on art and sort of deconstruct white thought that was influencing the forms that they were working in. So, when I think about the Black arts movement, I most think about Amiri Baraka, who you might know as LeRoi Jones, who was, um, a playwright and an artist. So he did, um, the one I've read is *Dutchman*, which is probably his most famous play. He started the Black Arts Repertory Theatre, and he wrote, I forget what it's called, but it is a document about the goals of the Black arts movement, which are pretty aligned with the Black power movement. It is like the aesthetic, like, cultural, sort of, counterpart to the Black power movement.

Allison: [00:18:26] No. Yeah. I wish I had more knowledge on it, so I could make that connection, but I think that's really interesting, that connection

that you're finding between, um, this music and how art was able to, like, just dismantle systemic racism. So, yeah. I'm definitely gonna look into that more. Yeah. Thank you for sharing.

Liv: [00:18:52] Yeah, my pleasure. And also, well, what brought it to mind was some of the problems with it. Like it was criticized as being sexist and anti-Semitic, and there, I mean, so that, that was part of what I was thinking of. Like, not only the similarities and goals, but also the similarities and maybe issues that these movements have dealt with and are dealing with.

Allison: [00:19:19] Yeah. I had just thought about how the Black Lives Matter movement is turning into that, like that brain, brain meme, you know, where it's like, it gets more and more detailed in each photo. Yeah, the galaxy brain. And so it's just kind of like, are you fighting for this? But if you're fighting for this, you need to be fighting for this and you need to be fighting for this. So, yeah, I think it's just kind of interesting how we've been able to really zoom in on all of the, like, micro-issues within the movement and how the music has been able to draw that out.

Matthew: [00:19:55] And this is exactly what intersectionality is trying to point out. It's like, things are never just one. It's never just, like, one aspect of your identity. Identity is intersectional for that exact reason.

Allison: [00:20:09] Absolutely.

Matthew: [00:20:10] I just wanted to quickly say that J. Cole is so dumb. Why did he do that? She runs a book club. Join the book club! Read the book, read a book, read one book.

Allison: [00:20:25] Yes. I, honestly, I didn't even listen to the song until, like, at the last minute, cause I just didn't, I, I already knew it was not going to make any sense, so...

Karen: [00:20:40] I think that they're, I could be wrong, but I think that there's starting to emerge a trend with, with that age group, that like, specific kind of early thirties, mid-thirties group of people coming out with their, either past questionable views or their current questionable views, just based off of the, like, socio-economic living status the country [had] then when they were growing up. Like, I've noticed that with YouTubers that are

that age group, and then also J. Cole, like, I think it's something unique about that specific little five-year age group in the millennial generation.

Allison: [00:21:23] Yeah, no, I mean, I think, thinking about Gen Z and millennials, it's really, I don't know. I just think generations are such a funny concept to me and being able to describe a generation is very hard, but I'm liking figuring out how to find common places in between millennials and Gen Z. And I feel like, because you can't, it's not like you can't, you can't just cut off a date and then be like, you're this or you're that. But I think definitely some of us will have the same views because we grew up with the same thing. So like, yeah. I guess those people that are like, kind of in the middle, they may have different or conflicting views, like, within themselves, because they were growing up, like, on, like, a transition point. Yeah. So I guess a driving force for the Black Lives Matter movement now for me is definitely anger. And I guess you could say with civil rights, it was also anger, but the way it was presented was in a different way. And I don't know if anyone else picked up on this, but with the earlier songs, I felt like it was kind of just like saying in this moment, this is what's happening and we need to stop it, whereas more like the music now is saying, this is not a moment and it's, it's a movement, so...

J.W.: [00:22:48] The thing that I was thinking about is the role of technology is really interesting, especially within music. If you're talking about music because of the ease with which people can make and distribute music now compared to like, [the] Civil Rights Era, because if you're making some form of protest, political-specific music back then, it had to go through, like, the whole, like, production, distribution process, which was first off, like pretty exclusive on a number of fronts. And it's just like way harder to get your music out there. And so when, when you do produce some kind of music, it has to be to, I guess, ensure commercial success. To some degree, you have, you have to like code stuff in a really thoughtful way, and you can't be as explicit a lot of the times if you don't, if you're, like, relying on that as a form of your, like, income, whereas nowadays, it's a lot more like, anybody can record something in their room if they have the right software and then just put it out and then social media allows it to just, you can just, like, Tweet it and it's just there and millions of people can listen to it. So it's a lot, it's an interesting mix of like, it's a lot more low stakes to put something out. Yeah. It's a lot more accessible, but it's also, it can be

immediate and reactionary to the degree that it couldn't have been in the past, which I think is also, it also results in stuff that can be more direct and more inflammatory, partially just like, basic, like, FCC codes and stuff like that compared to the mid-20th century, but also just because of the immediacy of it, you can put something out and I don't know, if it gets, like, flack, you delete the Tweet or something, like, it's like that kind of stuff. But it also has the potential to just reach a lot more people instantly than like 30 years ago, which is interesting.

Allison: [00:24:47] Yeah. That's a really, really, really good point. The technology really allowing you to be, like, more accessible has played a big part in the music that we are able to hear and how quickly we're able to hear it and how quickly it's able to be made and distributed. And it made me think, like there could have been music being made like this in prior time periods, but we never got to hear it because there was, there was no way for it to come out so quickly. Or, like, there being, like, some other type of restrictions from like labels or something like that. So, yeah, I think technology, and like you said, how musicians can just produce anything they want in their room, like, um, musicians being self-sufficient is very, it's a very good point to make that...music is just so much more accessible, especially with, like, streaming and all of that.

Matthew: [00:25:44] I also wanted to point out. I hate, I hate to bring him up because he's very publicly struggling with mental illness, but Kanye West. Kanye West sampled "**Strange Fruit**" for his song and I don't remember what the song was about, but people were really upset that he sampled this song. But because hip-hop artists can sample and can draw upon kind of legacies of Black music, they can get across these messages that, you know, once took an entire song to get across and they can just sample the song and you get the same kind of message. It's like you sample "**Strange Fruit**" and people know, maybe not in Kanye's case, but that, that there's kind of this, I like the phrasing you use, that this isn't a moment, it's a movement, because by drawing on, by sampling music from the past, you can kind of point out like, this is not just a moment, if it's a moment, it's like 150 years, you know, it's like a 400 year-long moment. And so it's kind of built right into the way that rap music is made. And additionally, like rap music for the most part has been kind of accepted into the mainstream pretty much unchanged from how it began. I mean, it's, it's different than like Grandmaster Flash,

but, but in the sense of like, it didn't need to be appropriated by white artists in order to be accepted, you know, it didn't need, it's still the same kind of message that it had when it first began. And so in that way, also, it's kind of drawing upon a history of, of genre. And I think that kind of lends some credence to what you're saying.

Allison: [00:27:17] With sampling, I feel like my parents always have something negative to say about sampling. They're like, *why are they just stealing someone else's music?* But you make a really good point. Like if they're sampling a song like "**Strange Fruit**," then it immediately re-evokes that feeling, that urgency of this movement of, uh, that reminder of like what we're fighting for. And the fact that hip hop is very much, uh, hip hop and rap is very much ingrained into popular culture now, it does make it very digestible for the masses. And at the same time, I think that it makes it easy, sometimes, it depends on the listener, to overlook the messages that are in the songs. Like, I've heard so many people will be like, *I love Kendrick Lamar*, but they don't really understand the messages that are in his songs. Um, so that's kind of like besides the point of his music, but yeah.

Karen: [00:28:14] Um, I never thought about, um, one of the articles that you posted talked about TikTok, and I never thought about it this way, but I think that all of this talk about banning TikTok has nothing to do with China spying on us and has everything to do with the fact that it's being, that it's being used to coordinate against things that the government dislikes, and I don't use TikTok, so how would I have ever known that without, I mean, I read the article, and I was like, wow.

Allison: [00:28:44] No, you're definitely onto something because TikTok has a history of shadow banning users that are like saying, like, *Black Lives Matter* and things like that. And I recently went through my saved TikToks, and I saw so many that were just like blacked out and it was like, *this video is no longer available*. And also to mention the fact that the Black Lives Matter hashtag was banned from TikTok for a little while, and then they, like, brought it back, but they still continue to shadow ban, so I definitely think that if it's actually being banned in the U.S., that the government agenda would have to be a part of it.

Karen: [00:29:27] Yeah, it's complete censorship, which I'm not for the ban of a social media platform kind of in any regard, no matter what, just

because of that totalitarianism, but this just backs up more reasons to like, don't ban something like that.

Matthew: [00:29:44] I was going to ask you what you think about this last little thing you wrote. You said a lot of people say that this generation of young people will be the ones to achieve real and final change and I was wondering if you also felt that way personally.

Allison: [00:30:00] I do. In what capacity? I don't know, 'cause I feel like, like everyone talks about how, like, it takes a long time to dismantle an entire system that this country was built upon. So it's really hard to imagine what actual change will look like. But I think it starts with us, first of all. And so like, growing up, we are going to become the ones that will be running this country eventually, and so that we'll be able to facilitate that change. I think that this generation is widely more aware of issues and willing to fight for marginalized groups and injustices. So, yes, I do think that we will be the ones to achieve real and final change.

Karen: [00:30:58] I will say that I really want to agree with that, but if you look back to the civil rights movements in the sixties, I think that the reason why they weren't the generation to have had the lasting change is because if you look at the way the government was structured back then, they just handed off their power to the generation that, you know, is now in power now, but they handed it off to the people who they had basically just trained to become them again. And I think that's what we need to prevent from happening. Like, we look at everybody that's protesting today and Gen Z and we're like, *okay, we're going to be in power one day and we are not going to let this stuff happen*, but who are, who are the politicians grooming to take over? How are they going to prevent the people that are actually the majority from gaining power?

Allison: [00:31:58] Yeah, that's a good point to bring up. Yeah. It's like a run around, 'cause, like, on one hand, I feel very optimistic because of the people around me, but also, like, you're right. Like, the politicians now are just breeding people who are just as terrible as them. So yeah, I mean, that's why I can't really be sure of, like, what capacity we will have changed, but hopefully just a little, hopefully a little. I'm hoping more artists come out with more impactful songs such as these, and we continue to be loud, cause I, I really enjoy it. I'm really just, like, grateful for these artists that are able

to use their art to speak on important things, because that's not something that I am, uh, like talented in doing or, like, able to do. So, I think it's really an important thing that they have done. And I think it's a really great way, music is just a great way to reach all different types of people, especially like we were talking about before, um, hip-hop and rap, since it's, since it's so, like, ingrained into popular culture, it makes it so much more easy for lots of people to understand these messages. So, yeah.