

Single identities are over! Conversation with Bertrand Dicale

BY ARNAUD LABELLE-ROJOUX

In a long conversation with Arnaud Labelle-Rojoux, Bertrand Dicale looks back on his book *Neither Black nor White: The History of Creole Music* (*Ni noires ni blanches : histoire des musiques créoles*, published by La Philharmonie - La rue musicale). This work shows how the tragedy of slavery contributed to the development of multiple forms of music: *Biguine, Bossa-nova, Calypso, Chachacha, Dancehall, Danzon, Forro, Gospel, Jazz, Kopa, Mambo, Merengué, Milonga, Morna, Negro-spiritual, Ragamuffi, Reggae, Reggaeton, Rocksteady, Salsa, Tango, Zouk...* All have in common the fact of being neither African nor European, not only Black nor only White, and not only dominating nor only oppressed. Their common historic origin brings them together more than anything else: they are Creole.

ARNAUD LABELLE-ROJOUX : The keyword of your book *Neither Black nor White* is Creolity. The writer, poet and the philosopher Edouard Glissant, of course, who theorized and reflected on the notion of Creolization, comes to mind. But it seems to me, and this is what I find fascinating in your extremely transversal approach to “Creolity”, that this concept allows us to shed new light on aesthetic interpenetrations beyond the reductive markers of identity. One could say that “Creolity” questions clichés on identity for the benefit of creative impurity. This idea of impurity seems essential to me...

BERTRAND DICALÉ: Absolutely. Europeans find it more difficult to speak about “White music” than “Black music”. There are places where this doesn’t matter. For example, in the suburbs of Western countries, or in countries in the South, where people say: “Hey! Your music’s White!” What’s wrong about that, is that many people, and mostly in a positive way, see an extremely clear and intellectualized identity attached to “Black” music. A kind of ontological purity of its own: it’s Black! But why should it be Black? I often burst out laughing when people listening to a percussive Tarantella in Southern Italy say to me: “You can tell that Africa is right near!” It’s absurd: there’s no such type of circulation! On the other hand, there are types of percussive, extremely rhythmic music in Europe, too. It has nothing to do with being close to Africa!

The concept of “Black music” projects a sort of essentialism. What’s dangerous here is that it ends up shutting things into compartments. It engenders a kind of assignation. I often give the example of an unquestionably left-wing French artist, committed to left-wing causes, who once said to me: “We’ve got a Black bass player, they’re the best!” That’s an openly racist essentialist cliché.

The idea of purity and therefore impurity has become fundamental. The idea of purity of “Black music” or “White music,” or of Black culture or White culture, suggests that people remain separate. Which is what will be “seen” when a Black man walks down the street in Paris. As if he’d be carrying the moral failure of the West, the barbarism of colonialism, the suffering of Africa along with him, like he would a sense of rhythm, a giant toothy laugh – Armstrong in the eyes of Nougaro, who is in fact the nigger Banania – or in the “Black” version (because the Negro of yesteryear is now “Black”). He’d be carrying something little short of elegance and grace, a specific, intrinsically non-White ethos. But this would transform into something incongruous, or even into a form of betrayal, the fact that a Black could be a passionate lover of European classical music and feel no bond with the supposedly “original” Africa.

A.L.-R.: A while ago I watched the movie *Statues Also Die* again by Chris Marker and Alain Resnais. What struck me was that even if the film was commissioned by the particularly anticolonialist review *Présence Africaine*, which had long been banned in France for that reason, it still wasn’t able to avoid certain clichés...

B.D. I don’t think I’ve seen that movie. It’s interesting to note that when a Black cultural vision is projected, it has to be deeply rooted, held tight and insistent, in order to convoke the constitutive bearings of an identity.

For example, my brothers and I don’t have the same skin colour. One of my brothers is an actor and has darker skin than me. He is regularly chosen to represent a sort of Negrocité, a form of Africanity. But we’re from the Antilles, from a French culture, without any particular identity attachment to Africa. At the same time, as a newspaper and radio journalist, without an Antilles accent, I often meet people who don’t understand why I’m crazy about Zouk, Kadans and Kompa music. The assumption behind these reflections on my fondness for this popular music perceived as “Negro” in the Antilles is clear: that music is for Blacks. People from the Antilles ask me: “Why does it interest you?” For them, I don’t need to, because I have “saved” skin, as they say over there for people with light skin.

My statement about Creole musicians and their impure side comes from being really annoyed with identity and racial assignations. Let’s just say that in the West, there’s always been an essentialist condescendence from left wingers - or at least part of them – against people from the South. And today there’s the belief, namely from the left, founded on the idea of an eternal condition: you’re Black, you’re Asian, you’re Maghrebin, you’re from a colonized people, and that’s what you are before anything else. But for how long? For how many generations? At what point in time do you stop being African?

There’s undeniably a contemporary form of racism, and maybe even systematic racism: is someone born in France today really concerned by Jules Ferry’s mechanisms of colonialism? Does he inevitably have to account for colonisation just by the colour of his skin?

The Creole vision – Edouard Glissant’s vision, which is also mine, as well as the vision

conveyed through popular music – is both a plea for the unpredictable and a war machine against colonialism, since it keeps on reminding us that it's the people who have invented their own cultures and not those in power. Jamaican genius is in Reggae, not in a music teacher behind his piano composing like Poulenc; the genius of the French Antilles is not only the poet Saint-John Perse, but the writers Césaire, Glissant, and Chamoiseau: high culture, but culture that has sprung from the people, place and circumstance.

My own anger – a multiple form of anger that concerns millions of people – is about the fact that certain left wing people in France always have something to say to us about Blacks, Maghrebins or Asians as an essence that imposes itself on individual destinies, but those same people have nothing to say about people of mixed race, coming from several cultures all at once – and I'm not the only Métis, we are millions, and there will be more and more of us. Creolity shows us that identity doesn't have to be happy, peaceful, or even legitimized. The reality of the Creole world – as well as the reality of all globalized societies – reveals that nobody can be reduced to a single identity.

A.L.-R.: That doesn't only apply to skin colour. It's also social, regional, cultural, artistic and sexual...

B.D.: The same applies to everyone! We should be creating views, and aesthetic, political criticism in order to integrate this reality, which does not only apply for Creole music and the historic, racial reality of my archipelago of origin.

It just so happens, for example, that I really like the artist Claire Tabouret. She had two exhibits in Avignon last summer. She was born in that region, the Vaucluse, and so the local press kept on saying how wonderful it was to see her coming home. However, Claire Tabouret was born there by chance, has no family in the region, studied in Paris and now lives in Los Angeles. For Americans and Chinese, she's a French artist, but that isn't clearly inscribed in her work. Shouldn't the critic or journalist's role be to construct a vision that questions this reality of her biography?

A.L.-R.: In spite of their work being different, the same goes for the artist Marcel Duchamp: Americans see him as a French-born American artist. He is still extremely French from many points of view. Without the patriotism, of course! It's the blend of two cultures that one perceives: he was surrounded by American culture, and he brought French culture with him (the world of *fin de siècle* illustrators, caricaturists, language, of course, and maybe a little corner of Normandy). It's essentially a form of "Creolity"! Those two different spirits of place made him who he was. In the very first pages of your book, there is the extraordinary list of music from, as you put it, the New World, starting in the 17th century, which are genres as well as unexpected encounters and mixtures, coming from specific places. The vertiginous variety says it all: Creolity is not uniformity! Globality is in fact the multiplicity of extreme singularities.

B.D.: An idea that's not in the book came to me during a conference: wouldn't this multiplicity of different types of music come precisely from an absence of identity? For example, take an extraordinarily idiosyncrasic type of music, from one place, a social sub-culture, in Europe: *Schlager*. It appeared in the late 19th century, and still exists, like *Musette* in France. But *Schlager* is much more powerful today in German show business than *Musette* is in France. This long-term musical identity corresponds to a vertical identity, which isolates soil, language, history, rights and diverse cultural productions. *Schlager* is a manifestation of Germanity that corresponds to the immutability of German identity. Obviously, Germany – and even the successive stages of Germany – is not only reduced to this genre, but for over a century, *Schlager* has represented a stable identity.

On the other hand, the hundreds of Creole genres listed at the beginning of the book might also stem from the fact that, since the populations of the Creole lands have no vertical identity like those of Europe or Old Africa, their uncertainty and their funambulism prompt them to produce one genre after the other, or even several new genres at once. Creolity, as a form of unsecure identity, creates a sort of headlong flight into cultural expression.

For example, in Haiti, the years of direct *Kompa* were also those of the birth of *Twoubadou*. But, at the same time, Haitians continued *Merengue*, and participated in the Pan-American birth of *Salsa*. In the Caribbean Islands, the proliferation and polyphony of the effervescent musical scene is extraordinary. In Aruba, an island of one hundred thousand inhabitants, at least four or five musical genres saw the day. Even if they are linked to other Caribbean musical forms, they are still part of a highly localized perception of identity.

These islands, which are geographically and culturally isolated, whilst located at a crossroad, have an incomparable musical creativity. As if their creativity were a compensation for an uncertain sense of identity. They show us what happens when there is no rooted identity. What do humans do when they have no vertical identity? Look at Sainte-Lucie, Martinique, Rio de la Plata... I don't have set beliefs about the issue, but one could think that from the moment you're not just Black nor just White, not just English nor French, if you're less than all of that, the mixture gives birth to Creole cultures with an exceptional creativity in music and in poetry.

A.L.-R.: I don't have set views either on the subject, but listening to you I was reminded of the related issue of cultural legitimacy. An American author, William T. Lhamon, wrote about the *Blackface* phenomenon in his book *Black Skins, White Masks*, and the philosopher Jacques Rancière, in the French preface, coined the phrase "culture without ownership". The premise of the book being that Blackfaces, rather than incarnating Blacks, represent outsiders from all different origins. Although there is still a racist aspect because we're dealing with parody. Does everything really belong to everyone?

B.D.: The first group of unemployed actors who invented the original Blackface in 19th century New York were four Irishmen, a despised minority. Today, the "nice" racism that

used to make fun of the picturesque Blacks or other inferiors consists in saying: you're Black, you're oppressed, I owe you something as a White, and that's why I'm going to admire the way you dance or consider that your Blackness makes you cool in a way I could never be. Many of the people who defend Black music with an entrenched specificity as compared to the rest of music often perpetuate incredibly violent racist clichés.

So, to answer your question, there is no cultural ownership and so no appropriation. Part of our culture is always the culture of someone else – because it's new, attractive and it makes sense when the world changes. If the slave speaks the master's language or plays the master's music, he can escape the destiny he would have had if he refused to do so. And the history of the island I come from teaches us that the master's language can also be the language of freedom, and that adopting it - or negotiating with it – is not necessarily an approach driven by hatred.

We should never forget that there is a collective trajectory of slaves and an individual trajectory of each slave, just like there is for the masters. In a country like Martinique during the French revolution, almost a third of the population were slaves, and the other two thirds weren't all slave owners. And, among those slave owners, a quarter were coloured people – Blacks and Mulattoes.

That's why, as soon as one reasons in terms of cultural ownership, you can't really account for reality. Why do we accept the fact that a Westerner is free to have the culture of his country of origin, along with his present and his biography, and not – I resume – colonized people? An individual culture can be marked forever by a trip to China at nine years old, or a visit to a museum, or by an unexpected musical encounter. And this culture is as free and as legitimate as any other.

A.L.-R.: That's a personal story, not culture. Take me, for example: the music that has accompanied me since my adolescence is Rock, Elvis Presley, the British Invasion and Phil Spector's girl groups, but I know well what that music owes to its Black side, maybe unconsciously...

B.D.: No, not at all, it was absolutely conscious. This music knows its sources. Only, it's not as "Black" as they say when it's European and White. People often say that Elvis slipped into Black churches on Sunday to hear Gospel music. That's nonsense. Elvis went to the Assembly of God, a Pentecostal Community that wasn't segregated. Ever since his childhood, there were Whites and Blacks in church, mostly separated, but traditional Gospel was sung there that, for a European or a White from Northern USA, was Black music. That was Elvis Presley's culture, and not an excursion into a different culture.

Every Sunday he sang *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*, but something started happening when he exploded in 1956, the year of *Heartbreak Hotel*, and also of his first album of religious songs. Journalists from the North began telling the story of Elvis being inspired by

Blacks, projecting a vision of the South, about which the White Southerners themselves were ashamed of – a shared culture between Blacks and Whites, from both sides of the segregation barrier. Those Whites – including Elvis, in a certain way – tried to make people understand collectively that their culture was separate.

A.L.-R.: It's true that Rock is neither Black nor White. But what I meant when I evoked Presley, or the girl groups, is that if this music belongs to my culture, it's by default, and if I use it as an artist, or even when I listen to it as an amateur, it's undoubtedly at the expense of what it underpins. Because I'm not American, neither from the North nor the South; I'm not even a musician, and my culture isn't only about that. It's made of high and low culture, as Americans say, and because Pop Music and Pop Art have "been there", that makes me place Rock and, let's say what I received from my family, my social milieu and my education, on the same level. What interests me in the notion of "Creolity" that you're developing, based on the music you're referring to is that all cultural material is usable by all aesthetic disciplines. It's about flattening hierarchies. I certainly adopted Rock, to make a long story short, to escape from an inherited bourgeois culture. But a precisely acquired culture! For that I was fortunate, and what made me really understand that was a remark made by the writer Olivier Cadiot, who has just translated *Twelfth Night or What You Will*: he said how thrilling it is for a writer to find the right form to translate Shakespeare when there is no equivalent in French. He also said that for Shakespeare, there wasn't any difference between how the elite and the people perceived the text. Still, I wonder today if Shakespeare only belongs to high culture?

B.D.: I don't think so. If you look at high culture, it's also eminently popular. Who goes to look at Mona Lisa? Jay-Z and Beyonce aren't the only ones who go to the Louvre! Millions of people go to see the painting that's supposed to be the paragon of classical Western art every year. And who turn their backs on the Mona Lisa in this room at the Louvre? People who, like me, go regularly to the Louvre to look at Veronese's *The Wedding Feast at Cana*, or his little *Crucifixion*. In this room, on Saturdays and Sundays, you can bourgeois families explaining to their children that you shouldn't look at the Mona Lisa, but at the paintings by Veronese. That's high culture today, not going to a museum to see the masterpieces of classical art.

A.L.-R.: But you look at Veronese too!

B.D.: Of course I look at Veronese. But a large part of our high culture is popular culture.

A.L.-R.: Except that high culture today isn't only high culture. If you admit that contemporary art is in this category, it only concerns a very restricted part of the population. The art market is no doubt a major factor, aimed at a public way beyond the bourgeois: ultra-rich collectors and the luxury industry.

B.D.: That's both true and false. Look at how many people visited the Dali Exhibition at the Centre Pompidou...

A.L.-R. : Dalí isn't contemporary art. It's historicized, museum art, and his painting certainly pleases the masses.

B.D.: But we forget that bankers bought his paintings, he had patrons and he went from scandal to scandal. His popular success story is something else. In certain cases, high culture remains high culture.

But then again, who listens to the Déjean de Pétiou Ville Brothers or the Schleu-Schleu? Bourgeois, educated people; vinyl collectors and music fans. And so popular culture has become high culture. This confusion of high and low doesn't bother me, all the more so because – retrospectively – Creole music provides systematic proof, for each territory and period, that low can produce high. What's prophetic about Creole culture is precisely that popular cultural expression often becomes the only form of native culture: the Jamaican elite have had to admit that it hasn't been their good old composers of waltzes and sonatas or painters of three apples in a dish like Cézanne who have created the power of their culture, but Reggae, music from the streets, from sects, drugs and slums... It was the same in the early twentieth century for Argentines and Tango.

A.L.-R.: I read your book well, and I really find that amazing. But to go back to what I was saying at the beginning of our discussion, because it justifies the fact that our conversation is now about high and low culture, one could finally say that the principle of Creolity corresponds to any experience of cultural mixing once the elements that compose it are equal. This can be applied to the visual arts – like early Rock music – the sum of what they are composed of, stripped of any type of hierarchy. Sociologically, there is still the question of the legitimacy of this mixing. Art, in my view, is essentially critical. Mike Kelley, the American artist, cantor of a critical fusion between high and low, noted that today's dominating culture is sub-culture, and at the same time, since he comes from a working-class milieu in Detroit, and plays Noise music, he also shows that this culture is in a certain way insoluble in the dominating culture, and especially inadapted by the art bands he stigmatised. In other terms, like certain artists from migrant backgrounds, the tenacious idea that certain artists could bear an identity outside of the dominating culture, an identity that they alone could incarnate.

B.D.: A journalist once remarked that the artist Djamel Tatah didn't just paint Whites but people, although this quality of universal people was lost when he represented veiled women. It is extraordinary how the artist's origin came to surface through a pictorial motif. For many years, Djamel Tatah didn't really have any roots, because he belonged to the French circuit of contemporary art; and then his origin reappeared, like a form of questioning, through an iconographic choice.

But he could have painted veiled women without this reflecting his background, if it wasn't his origin. This *reductio ad absurdum* argument shows that you can be Black, Maghrebin and even White all at once. Meaning an obvious identity, or none at all. Maybe the most striking aspect of both contemporary art and popular Creole music, at the extremities of high and low, is the capacity to distance oneself from a vertical, "natural", evident identity. Single identities are over.

In the States or in China, would you say that Djamel Tatah is Algerian-born French, or French-Born Algerian?

David Donatien has an interesting approach to popular music. He is a percussionist, producer, arranger and composer from Martinique. He works with his partner Yael Naïm, a French-Israeli singer-composer. Their music, composed together, was launched all over the world thanks to an advertisement for Apple. *New Soul* became a hit overnight and their career exploded. All professionals are aware of David Donatien's role in Yael Naïm's success, as well as the fact that his music is not specifically Caribbean. It's international Pop, influenced by multiple sources, extremely attractive and yet complex in its genealogy. However, people contact him to propose collaborations or realisations of albums of Caribbean music. If he is not summoned for his "Antillaniness", he is not musically Caribbean.

A.L.-R.: That's typical in contemporary art: I suspect certain artists of sometimes choosing to be what one asks them to be as far as identity is concerned.

B.D.: And so they play up to a reductive vision of identity. But that's also an elitist vision. In a way, a *high* flavour of exoticism! Creole music today is dominant in everyday European listening: Reggae, Blues, Zouk, Latin and Brazilian music... But if we go back to the transmission of Creole music in Europe, the *Congo* minuet was danced at the court of Louis 16th. Written sources bear evidence of the amusement these dancing steps brought to the Court of Versailles thanks to travellers. However, the cultural perfume of the colonies did not come from soldiers or sailors, but from the Court, where young girls from nobility were enchanted to dance "Negro steps" in bare feet. *High* exoticism is not a new idea!

A.L.-R.: But I suppose people also say to you that your interest in Creole music is not unrelated to your roots...

B.D.: My way of thinking is like an archipelago, even if I was born in Paris. Professionally, my writing is mostly focused on French Chanson, even if Creole music is certainly my innermost field of expertise – I've been working in that area for many, many years. There's a lot of Rock in my 15,000 or so records. Sometimes people are surprised that I have such a passion for groups like the Pixies and R.E.M., Mod subculture and the Kinks – all these make up who I am as much as any obvious identity attributes. Only, Rock music isn't part of my research. Nobody can be reduced to a single identity.

A.L.-R.: In any case, we share the Kinks!

Interviewed on the 23rd October 2018.

Translation by Emmelene Landon

The book *Ni noires ni blanches : histoire des musiques créoles* (éditions de la Philharmonie - La rue musicale) obtained in 2018 the prize in the category Music of the International Artbooks and Film Festival Perpignan.