G Love
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Critics love to categorize music. It makes them feel better when they discuss an artist and can precisely pinpoint the artist's sound or style. And when an artist doesn't fit into an existing category, it seems as if critics create new categories just to reaffirm themselves that they can fully understand and explain an artist. What happens though, when an artist falls under the blues/funk/rock/folk/hip hop category? There's no way to simplify it-- and there's no better way to describe G. Love and Special Sauce.

G. Love and Special Sauce is comprised of three white boys who pool their talents together to produce a unique blend of blues, funk, and hip hop with touches of folk-rock and country. G. Love himself gets angry because "people always want to pigeonhole the musical style" (Thomas 1). The band has affectionately classified their sound as "ragmop" but they stand alone in this musical style. G. Love or Garrett Dutton, a native of Philadelphia, carries the group on vocals, guitar, and the blues harmonica. Behind him, there's Special Sauce, with Jimi "Jazz" Prescott on acoustic bass, and "The Houseman" Jeffrey Clemens on drums and percussion. How can a bunch of white boys who don't have a dj, and play rock instruments be considered hip hop?

Since its origin in the early 1970s, hip hop music has never been clearly defined. Tricia Rose starts off Black Noise with a formal description of rap music as a "black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America" (Rose 2). She continues to illustrate it as a "form of rhymed storytelling accompanied by

highly rhythmic, electronically based music" and she emphasizes the personal experience or the "realness" of it as we've alluded to throughout our hip hop class.

Rose's definition nails what hip hop music was in the 1970s and the early 1980s but hip hop culture, especially the musical aspect of it, has since expanded to a point where it's really ambiguous whether something is hip hop or not.

Hip hop started off as a local culture—lower-class black and Latino youths in the South Bronx were doing something by themselves for themselves. Naturally, in the same way that other Black-American musical styles such as jazz and funk, changed, so did hip hop. The pattern occurs such that the white dominant culture derides hip hop, then embraces it, and soon with time, hip hop becomes nationalized, commercialized, and bastardized. This is not to say that nothing positive has happened in hip hop since its early days. On the contrary, hip hop has blossomed into a rich and diverse culture. In the process however, it's boundaries have become less clear and Rose's definition no longer accurately portrays what hip hop is today.

Primarily, there is the issue of whiteness. It is paradoxical the way that there lies a world dominated by one culture residing in a larger world dominated by another. The way that the black man is the minority of the United States, the white man is the minority of the hip hop domain. In order for a white rapper to succeed and gain respect in the hip hop world, he "must be able to borrow without losing sight of [himself] as [a borrower]" (White 194). Often, white rappers get scoffed at because they try to imitate the black rappers while leaving what they know behind. Ice Cube's cousin, Del Tha Funkee Homosapien, alludes to his disregard for Vanilla Ice in a verse from his dis, "Pissin' on Your Steps". He raps, "Ice is cool, but I can't stand vanilla/ Because he takes a style and

tries to mock it/ Ain't nuthin' personal, G/ But I'm kinda into chocolate." (Perkins 37). It is hard for a white rapper's talent and passion to be appreciated because so often, it can be mistaken as mockery. This is all pending on the rapper's style and intentions.

Some white rappers succeed by embracing hip hop in the non-traditional sense. They take hip hop and do something new with it. As Sridhar M. Reddy says in his essay, *As It Goes*, "If I can't rap like a black man, then I'll rap like a white man, in my own special way. It's a respectable thing to do, and it avoids the pitfall of trying to be someone you're not". In this category falls artists like Beck, who is a musical experimentalist and often includes hip hop in his music to supplement other styles, like rock, psychedelia, and folk. The song that brought Beck national attention in 1994, "Loser", was a hybrid of languid rock and mellow hip hop. This white rapper with an odd and playful attitude definitely stood out on the radio. In this same category as Beck lies our beloved, G. Love and Special Sauce.

Garrett Dutton III, was born in 1972 in Philadelphia and grew up worshipping "at the altar of black music" (Klein 1). He was an avid blues fan obsessed with artists like Mississippi John Hurt and Fred McDowell. And in terms of hip hop which was a huge part of his life, he notes Run-D.M.C and the Beastie Boys as early influences. It was what he grew up with and what he loved.

But his other major influence swings from the other side of the spectrum: Bob Dylan. G. Love was influenced by Dylan's expressive nature and Dylan's ability to reach people without having the greatest voice. "[Dylan] opened the door for people like me- I'm technically not really a singer. But just from singing and writing I learned to express myself", G. Love explains (Miller 3). During his high school years, G. Love brought his

guitar and his blues harp to the street where he would play for hours and lose himself in personal euphoria. After trying a year at Skidmore, Dutton realized that school was not his chosen path and he moved to Boston where he met up with Jimi Prescott and Jeffrey Clemens. After less than a year together, the band signed to the Epic Records Group through its roots-oriented Okeh label. Their first self-titled album was released in May 1994 and has sold over 350,000 copies to date. On this album, G. Love and Special Sauce introduced a collection of authentic numbers that derived from G. Love's strong affection for his influences. The album was a strange combination of blues, hip hop, funk, and folk. How do those styles work together? It was unheard of. Until they did it four more times.

Over the past eight years, G. Love and Special Sauce have produced five albums and I own them all. I don't own the entire discography of any other artist. Who are these guys and why do I like them so much?

My sister introduced me to them while she was in college seven years ago by making me a tape of their first album. It was the summer before my freshman year of high school and I was headed for a family vacation in Greece. I brought my walkman with me and somehow the only tape that got packed into my suitcase was my G. Love tape. For three weeks, whenever I wanted to block out my loud and obnoxious Greek family, I put my headphones on and immersed myself into this world of "ragmop". I never grew tired of it. I knew the words of all the songs and I started imagining myself as this white boy from Philly.

G. Love does that to you. He tells you about his life through his songs. It's nearly impossible to hear his music and not know that he grew up in Philadelphia. In that

respect, he's all hip hop. He is very true to his roots and never tries to be something that he's not. In the track "This Ain't Living", G. Love starts the song rapping, "This town's so hype it's got soul/ As a Philly cat/ I'm with the roll". G. Love's lyrics make it impossible to cover one of their songs.

It's not just the lyrics that make it unfeasible to cover one of their songs. Their sound is incredibly difficult to imitate. G. Love and Special Sauce go from a purely rock sound in "Garbage Man" to a more funky beat in "Eyes Have Miles", all the while possessing a tint of hip hop with G. Love's smooth rhymes overlying the background. We have talked in class about how difficult it is for a hip hop artist to change styles. A hip hop artist must pick a style, a persona, and stick with it. MC Hammer tried to change and he failed. But here we have a group of white boys who can change sounds *within* an album and be praised for it.

The other unique element that can be found on this album is a tribute to one of G. Love's inspirations: blues music. The second track of the album, actually titled "Blues Music", honors the musical style and its prominent figures. In his simplistic way, G. Love explains how blues music is the basis of everything. "The bass wail sings/Let the rhyme bring/The tense of the time/The Old time/Blues music". G. Love borrows ideas from his influences but he mines "these sources in a way that pays tribute rather rips off" (McCrary 3). G. Love admires musical styles such as blues and hip hop, and uses these styles in his music, but he doesn't "lose sight of himself as a borrower".

G. Love's second album, *Coast to Coast Motel,* again has more in "common with John Lee Hooker than it does with Dr. Dre" (McGill 1). His sound is bluesy but there's no mistaking that hip hop is a major ingredient in the mix. He raps nearly every song but

the sound behind his rhymes is what makes the group unconventional in the hip hop sense. His beats aren't electronically made, they are real. Instead of a dj, there's a bassist and a drummer. In this respect, G. Love and Special Sauce joins the ranks of the Roots and Ozomatli but even with the instrumental factor in common, G. Love and Special Sauce are hardly comparable to these other hip hop bands. Their mellow sound is just so different from anything else you hear in the hip hop world.

Aside from the sound, it should be noted that G. Love's lyrics possess a certain quality of originality as well. On *Coast to Coast Motel*, there's no BMW's, nobody gets shot, and nobody's "packin' a nine" which makes it a refreshing change from many rap albums. He raps about soda pop and "kissing and telling" and in the first album, he raps about the garbage man and shooting hoops. Is it okay that G. Love doesn't rap about how much money he has or that he doesn't have a powerful message to send to his audience? He raps about his life and his experiences and oftentimes, it comes out inconsequential. For instance, in "Soda Pop", he rhymes, "I like soda pop/I like cough drop/ Like chicken lo mein/ I'm the main dish". Quite clearly, they are simple rhymes about simple topics but G. Love knows that. He's not trying to be something he's not. And his audience can relate more to what he's saying than to the "bling bling" lifestyle that is a popular topic of mainstream rappers. In essence, his words are *not* inconsequential because the majority of rap listeners can identify with them a lot more than they can with gangster rap. Sean McGill finds that this "same lack of violence will possibly keep [*Coast to Coast Motel*] from finding a large audience". Here again arises the question of realness and being true to yourself. Not all aspiring rappers grow up in the gangster lifestyle that seems to be the stereotype of the successful hip hop artist. Is

success equated with the type of experiences you have? No, it's a matter of what the artist makes of his or her experiences. For instance, Run-DMC, the Beastie Boys, and Lauryn Hill all grew up in middle-class neighborhoods and became successful and respected artists without straying from their roots. They sing about what they know and who they are and that in turn becomes much more powerful than imitators who try to rap about a lifestyle that is not their own. Likewise, G. Love succeeds by being "real"—he might not be at the same level of stardom as say, Nelly or Eminem, but quite honestly, I don't think he cares to be.

G. Love is about reaching out to his audience at an intimate level, performing at small venues and being approachable to his fans. From personal experience, attending a G. Love show is not something that can be forgotten.

Imagine an intimate, crowded venue where everyone is relaxed and feeling the groove. On stage are three guys who have sweat dripping down their faces because they have been pouring out their hearts for nearly two and a half hours. The vocalist has been telling you his thoughts as if you were his best friend, his problems as if you were his therapist. You leave the venue affected, and you feel as though you have known the boys on stage your entire life but ironically, you have never even spoken a word to them. When you get home, you can't help but play a G. Love cd. It's an addiction.

My all-round favorite album is their third, *Yeah, it's That Easy. Yeah, it's That Easy* has the same ingredients as the previous two albums but the band really have it together on this album. The album's more polished and mellower than the previous two. "It's an uncomplicated vibe with an incredibly complex background" (Stovall 1). G. Love invites guest musicians like New Orleans icon Dr. John to add greater texture to the

quality of the album. The album as a whole possesses a sadder tone than the first two with tracks like *Slipped Away,* a ballad about a Lauretha Vaird, an officer in Philadelphia who was slain in the line of duty. Nonetheless, he maintains the element of realness and continues to talk about simple everyday issues that people experience. The opening number, "Stepping Stones", talks about a friend using him as a "stepping stone", and through his simple lyrics and funky beats, G. Love's listener can not help but sympathize with his words. "Ain't it enough to have a man for a lover and a friend/Tear him up and leave him when the money's spent/Well, you're just like Delilah sittin' in her den/ You take the strongest man and break 'em down again", he sings. *Yeah, It's that Easy* is no more than G. Love doing his thing and doing it right.

And he does it again with his fourth album, *Philadelphonic* (you start to get the point that Philadelphia means a lot to him). There's not much to say about this album that's too different from the other three. Just like his debut album, *Philadelphonic* has a tribute song but this time around, he honors hip hop. The track is called "Rock & Roll (Shout Outs Back to the Rappers)" and he runs through the history of hip hop through his own experiences.

He recalls how he was first introduced to hip hop, at the basketball league, "this kid said 'Yo come here and/Put these headphones on your ears'/ I was converted then/ And practiced it for years". A little later in the song he raps, "I remember when my girl bought me Tribe Called Quest/ We broke up later but I kept the cassette". If G. Love's hip hop influence wasn't made evident earlier, here was the explicit tribute.

The Electric Mile, G. Love's fifth and final album, leaves his audience hungry for more. Each of his albums gets progressively better than the one before it until we reach

The Electric Mile, which is near perfection, in terms of what the band's after. Again, the trio brings in outsiders like pianist John Medeski from Medeski Martin and Wood, and percussionist Billy Conway from Morphine to "really fire [them] up" (Hip Online 1). The album gets started with "Unified", a high energy ska track and then transitions into a funk number with backup gospel-sounding singers, "Praise Up". "Praise Up" is followed by the smooth and melodic "Night of the Living Dead" which then goes right to a "tense, caustic hip hop track", "Parasite" (Hip Online 1). Only four songs into the album and the listener is exposed to ska, funk, blues, rock, hip hop, and a touch of gospel. The sound on this album is incredibly diverse but it all fits together like a jigsaw puzzle. It's so tight. Who else can bring so many styles together and make it work? Not many other people. In fact, I can't think of anyone.

It's clear that G. Love and Special Sauce is a unique band with a special sound that is hard to match. But do they succeed at what they are trying to do and can they be welcomed into the hip hop world? In other words, is it justified to call the members of G. Love and Special Sauce hip hop artists?

G. Love and Special Sauce are three musicians who come from different musical backgrounds and combine their ideas to create something new. Most musicians work at making their sound distinct from the rest but only a select few do, and even fewer do it well. In my opinion, the boys of G. Love and Special Sauce succeed. You hear one of their songs, you immediately know it's them. No one but G. Love and Special Sauce complements an emcee's rhymes with an upright bass and a blues harp.

In terms of hip hop, are people within the hip hop domain willing to accept G. Love's music as hip hop music? A similar question arose during the Musicality

presentation when someone asked the question, “Can a musician’s sound be non-hip hop and hip hop and be allowed in the hip hop world?” (10/31/02). It’s difficult to reach a conclusion to this question because definitions are so murky. According to Tricia’s Rose’s original definition of hip hop, or rap music, the answer is no, such a musician can not consider himself a hip hop artist. Rose highlights that rap music is a black form of expression, it comes from the margins of urban America, and it is electronically-based. The members of G. Love and Special Sauce are all white, they grew up middle-class, and none of their songs are electronically-produced. They use live instruments in all their performances and recordings. In this case, how can I even consider writing a hip hop paper on this band? The problem with Rose’s definition is that it is not broad enough to define what hip hop is today. The hip hop music industry is still predominantly black and electronically based but there has been a lot of borrowing of hip hop that is extending it’s boundaries to unclear horizons. In his music, G. Love is borrowing the emcee and realness aspects of hip hop and doing something with them that hasn’t been done in hip hop before. There is the issue of *stealing* a sound but I’ve reiterated that G. Love knows he’s a borrower and pays tribute to his lenders.

After much thought, I have come to conclude that G. Love and Special Sauce are not and can not be part of the hip hop world. There is no doubt that they use hip hop elements in their music but they are merely borrowing. They are not proclaiming themselves as hip hop artists. They have created a world and style for themselves that they fit perfectly into, separate from hip hop. They boys of G. Love and Special Sauce are not hip hop artists mainly because they are so much more than that. They’re blues musicians too. And folk artists. They are unique. They are G. Love and Special Sauce.

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