

I wanted to access the acoustics of leisure and limbo between recordings and performances for Black musicians, what Stevie Wonder calls “Pastime Paradise,” and render them as an endless scroll sonically. I could eavesdrop on this arkestra of mumbles, din, and overheard confessions forever. In assembling it, improvising it from my collection of archival recordings stolen and discovered on quiet digital roads paved by corroborated hearsay, I realized I was reconstructing my own cultural genealogy. These voices in their strange unrelenting chorus of chaos and repose, soothe me, like some kind of retribution for the sacrifices inherent in them and their being sacrificed and tricked into pursuing entertainment as a path to artmaking. What the best musicians are pursuing is a sound only they can hear and translate, a transliteration of their unique manner of interpreting God’s intentions as cadence and intonation. Ask me about God, you might catch Prince saying to a reporter if you circle the round of this room a few times. And Baraka will respond, All American artists are philistines. That yearning pursuit of the imagination’s harvest is interrupted by showmanship and fame and something in their spirits might go silent or numb or so nimble it escapes and disassociates while the body remains on stage, carrion and drums and an undone will to carry rhythm and tone as offerings. Life on stage often enables dysfunction, or mandates it; it’s very strenuous to be to a spectacle and an illusion, to fulfill and disappoint the fantasies of passive but entitled audiences who want dinner and a show, on time, rehearsed, identical to how they conceive it, and see any fluctuations in performance as betrayals or derailments.

These snatches of the taboo and tainted margins of Black music are my path to the sublime. I’ve turned them into an inconclusive conversation as ritual that is subversive in the sense that these discrete rebel gestures and comments were never meant to exist in concert; their fragmentation made it easier to seduce Black musicians into alienation, seclusion even, in the comfort of their private obsessions. As ensemble they function more like a threat or collective realization of the failure of every industry involved in the exploitation of their talents. One rapper’s famous megalomania becomes reverence for the kind of blues that don’t require suffering and a singer rehearsing turns into a rapper walking to the beauty supply store for wig glue. Time doesn’t matter here, there’s no such thing as anachronism because Black music is a tool that will alter the destiny of time itself at its best, and at its most casual, prove that Black people organize and self-actualize through song, not public performance of song but the more traditional use, wherein music is as functional as a house. This house, a refuge for pleasure and disaster, the mundane and the harrowing, can only be occupied by those who can hear ruins as dreams unraveling into coherence, the visions that cannot be destroyed by detractors. Hopefully it sounds like being backstage about to go on and perform or record for the past four hundred years—the eras are interchangeable because their themes are so reliable—trouble, love, escape, loveless love, in a loop until triumph is forgetting where one ends and the next begins. This paradise of our wreckage may destroy you but you will hear beautiful unencumbered music and your muses singing it to you as you go under.