

Bands, Influences, and Performance: The Diversity of Cee-Lo Green

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Outline

Thesis: Ultimately, to understand Cee-Lo Green, one must explore the unique, unclassifiable nature of his musical groups, influences, and performance style.

I. Genre Pushing Musical Groups

A. Goodie Mob.

B. Gnarls Barkley.

C. Solo Career.

II. Diverse Musical Influences

A. Gangsta Rap.

B. British Alternative Rock.

C. Androgynous Musicians.

III. Unusual Musical Performances

A. High, precise voice.

B. Weird performances with gospel tinge.

Bands, Influences, and Performance: The Diversity of Cee-Lo Green

Cee-Lo Green is becoming known for a song as potentially offensive as it is catchy: “F**k You.” From the streets of Atlanta, Georgia, to sharing the stage with Muppets and Gwyneth Paltrow, an academy award winning actress, at the 2011 Grammy Awards, Green has had an interesting trajectory towards musical fame and fortune. His journey has been as unpredictable as it has been diverse. He periodically remakes himself so that, every few years, we can expect a new Cee-Lo Green on stage in front of us. For this essay, we will examine three articles “Gnarls Barkley goes ‘crazy’” (Braiker, 2006), “If I wasn’t famous, I’d be a hitman or a pimp” (Rifkind, 2011), and “Crazy for ‘Crazy’” (Rosen, 2006) to understand the unique, unclassifiable nature of Green’s musical groups, influences, and performance style.

Cee-Lo’s diversity is obvious in the musical groups he has been a part of. To date, he has been a member of two professional groups (Goodie Mob and Gnarls Barkley) as well as his solo act, which has produced three records. First, as mentioned above, was Goodie Mob which Green joined when still a teenager. This band created the “Dirty South sound” in hip-hop (Braiker, 2006, para. 3). Rifkind (2011) tells us Green’s music during this period was “hip-hop that sounded like hip-hop” (para. 23). The next group was Gnarls Barkley, an “odd duo” formed with DJ Danger Mouse (Rifkind, 2011, para. 6). Whereas his early music was hip-hop, his Gnarls Barkley sound was a mix of electronica and soul, even mixing in “DJ deconstructions” of their own songs (Rosen, 2006, para. 3). During his solo career, his sound has been classified by Rifkind (2011) as “pop outrage” (para. 9). Hip-hop, soul, and

pop are important parts of his past and present. As a result, many bands cover Green's songs, as well. With such diversity in musical groups, who knows what Green's sound will next be?

Cee-Lo Green must have had many musical influences being as diverse as his style is, but it is surprising what they are. His first musical influence was street life as he was a gangsta rapper from the streets of Atlanta, which was covered above. In addition to hip-hop music, Green draws influence from a diverse set of other influences, ranging between the Cure (a British alternative rock band) and Boy George (the androgynous lead singer of the 1980's band Culture Club) to rock band Queen (as cited in Rifkind, 2011, para. 23-26). Moreover, Green has done a Violent Femmes (1980's alternative rock band) cover, written songs about undead creatures, and lyrics that sound like poet Stanley Kunitz, the tenth poet laureate of the United States. Some of his sound and themes stem from the band Parliament Funkadelic that played a mixture of soul, funk, and rock (Braiker, 2006, para. 6; Rosen, 2006, para. 5). So, we can add horror, funk, teen angst, and poetry to the list of androgynous alternative and mainstream influences that built the diverse Cee-Lo Green we see before us today.

Finally, how does the diversity manifest in a Cee-Lo performance, and how will his diverse musical influences combine to build the show? These days, we will not see hip-hop. Rifkind (2011) tells us Green, "doesn't really do hip-hop any more" and that he now uses a "high, precise voice" (para. 25). On some songs, Rosen (2006) says, Green gives a "weird performance filled with long pauses and gospel-style stutters and exclamations" (para. 5). "Crazy," Braiker (2006) says, is "all soul" that is better called "singing" than singing because it is coming from a deeper, rough, and elemental place inside of him (para.

5). When Green performs, we can expect an “undeniable groove” and a “catchy chorus” (Rosen, 2006, para. 6). We can also expect theatrics. In a photoshoot for the album “Crazy,” Green wore a wedding dress (Rifkind, 2011, para. 31). The costuming is reproduced on stage. For example, Green and his bandmate Danger Mouse most notably dressed as Star Wars characters on stage. Green was wearing a Darth Vader costume. Danger Mouse was dressed as Obi---Wan Kenobi. Quite often, they perform in similarly movie---inspired costumes, creating a “weirdly unclassifiable,” “hip shtick” performance and persona (Rosen, 2006, para. 7). In other words, expect the unexpected from a Cee-Lo Green performance. Diversity is his hallmark.

All in all, Cee-Lo Green is a chameleon who changes with the environment he finds himself in, mixing and matching bands, influences, and performance style in interesting and unclassifiable ways. He is willing to break with tradition. This is the reason why his song “Crazy” was simultaneously on the pop, R&B/hip-hop, adult contemporary, and modern-rock charts (Rosen, 2006). Green does not take fame seriously. What he does take seriously is the music he makes that reaches across borders just as he extends beyond the borders in his own life. The music he makes is somewhat a map of his life that shows where he is at any particular time. He has not hinted what his next musical step will be, but with his diversity and sense of musical freedom, it will be a surprise, I assure you.

References

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