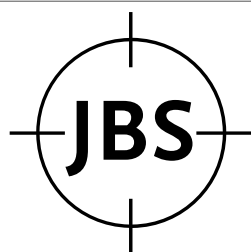


Blaxploitation and African-American Musical Tropes in *Live and Let Die* and “Live and Let Die”

RICHARD MILLS

Guy Hamilton's *Live and Let Die* (1973) is a Blaxploitation film in terms of aesthetics, stereotyping, and music. It was released in the same era as *Shaft* (1971), *The Mack* (1973), and the TV show *Starsky and Hutch* (1975-1979). In all three, the Black characters are stereotypical criminals (pimps and hustlers); but, paradoxically, this also gives African Americans agency and leverage within the white Hollywood machine. These clichéd characterisations are the staple of the Ian Fleming novel *Live and Let Die* (1954), Hamilton's filmic adaptation of the same, and the hackneyed musical Reggae tropes of Paul McCartney's theme song “Live and Let Die” (1973). Fleming, Hamilton, and McCartney's work collectively contains the seeds of racist colonial history while at the same time representing artistic third spaces of ethnic hybridity and therefore spaces of potential change.

Ian Kinane's *Ian Fleming and the Politics of Ambivalence* discusses many key interpretations of the novel *Live and Let Die*, problematising both Jason Dittmer's (2008) and Sam Goodman's (2016) theses that Fleming puts racist stereotypes into effect in the novel. Citing O.F. Snelling (1964), Gerald Early (1965), Umberto Eco (1966), and Vivian Halloran (2005), Kinane offers the contrary view that there is a pluralistic “racial imagination” (Kun 2005, 26; see also Bhabha 1994) at the heart of Fleming's work. Hamilton's film extends these imagined identities further, giving the Blaxploitation characters agency, and his film is a source of



THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF

James Bond Studies

Volume 9 · Issue 1 · Spring 2026

ISSN 2514-2178

DOI: 10.24877/jbs.153

Distributed under CC BY 4.0 UK

Richard Mills is Associate Professor of English Literature and Popular Culture at St. Mary's University, Twickenham, London.

post-colonial transformation. Kinane further writes that there is “much evidence to support both sides” (2021, 83) in terms of this racial debate, and this is the core of my argument here: I set out to delineate the extent to which Guy Hamilton’s film and McCartney’s theme song occupy a utopian third space in which Orientalism and absurdity clash, and where binaries are transgressed by a pluralistic racial imagination – to wit, Hamilton’s film and McCartney’s theme song subvert the binary of Orientalism, which is the assumption that Eastern/Oriental cultures are “in need of corrective study by the West” (Said 1968, 41). This political ambivalence, I argue, is the source of subversive potential within the James Bond franchise, wherein gender and ethnicity assumptions can be challenged.

My discussion of the cinematic and musical stereotypes in *Live and Let Die* is motivated by a further two texts. The first is my own book, *The Beatles and Black Music: Post-Colonial Theory, Musicology and Remix Culture* (2025), which explores theories of musical and ethnic hybridity, audiotopias, and diaspora; the second is Camille S. Alexander’s excellent work on Blaxploitation in *Live and Let Die* (2019; 2020). The present piece builds on Alexander’s work by discussing portrayals of ethnicity in the film, juxtaposing the clichés to be found therein with the musicological tropes of McCartney’s *sui generis* song. Analysing the theme song and the Blaxploitation clichés in the film demonstrates the extent to which binaries are enforced by the Hollywood system. Conflating Kinane’s concept of “the politics of ambivalence” and Alex Adams’ notion of “doubleness”, I argue that both Hamilton’s film and McCartney’s song are texts which acknowledge their authors’ “fluctuating ideation with respect to the politics of race in the context of both the emerging Black Power movement within the United States and fledgling multiculturalism within Britain” (Kinane, 55). Bond symbolises “the best aspects of the British national character” whilst also personifying “the trials of decolonisation” (Adams 2017, 143). Both film and song represent a set of conflicting impulses which unconsciously attempt to ameliorate Britain’s horrific colonial past while simultaneously imagining a more pluralistic and progressive political future.

Alexander’s discussion of ethnicity is key to understanding these texts’ exoticism of the Other. She notes that:

African Americans are also portrayed within the film in stereotypical ways, functioning solely as members of Kananga’s multi-national criminal organisation. Afro-Caribbeans are subject to white Hollywood’s reductionism as the purveyors of voodoo superstition and participants in cult-like ceremonies, distancing them from European Christianity, logic, and sanity. *LLD*

[*Live and Let Die*] promotes a false narrative of western black lives, and it is Bond's duty, as a representative of the Empire, to right the former colonies, using his license to kill when required. The film implies that African Americans are exclusively tied to criminal activities by only depicting blacks as active participants in Kananga's drugs trafficking empire. Afro-Caribbeans, however, are depicted as Kananga's superstitious pawns who require Bond's assistance to be brought black under the Empire's control. (2020, 7).

This is a very cogent and coherent discussion of the film, but there is also a complex, kaleidoscopic interdependency of ethnic and musical hybrid identities at the heart of both the film and song. To some extent, Hamilton and McCartney ignore political reality and consequently their work is utopian or audiotopian. This means an indeterminate "third space" of identity comes into being, which is emancipatory and radical. Building on Alexander's work, I contend that *Live and Let Die* is a space of transformation that is remote from political reality, and that the film and song re-enervate the moribund and monocultural Hollywood of the period. The production typifies certain Blaxploitation tropes which casually homogenise Black characters and absurdly ignore the myriad identities of the Caribbean islands. But these Hollywood and musical fantasies have a historical place and importance, as the Black characters on the screen are often seen to inhabit a third space of "Afro Cool". *Live and Let Die* is a space of post-colonial agency of which Hamilton and McCartney's work is but one golden strand of a beautiful cinematic and musical weave. Watching and listening to *Live and Let Die* is an auditory and visual experience where Caribbean and Caucasian identities are inextricably linked to creative possibilities. *Live and Let Die* is more than a whimsical colonial fantasy: it is a potentially post-colonial cinematic and musical space where the indigenous peoples powerfully collide with Bond and a Beatle stimulating "community empowerment, cultural pride, generational relations and racism, with playful and appealing aesthetics" (Picarelli 2015, 218). It is no wonder that McCartney ends his live shows with a version of *Live and Let Die* that is accompanied by heart-stopping pyrotechnics. This firework display is a figurative explosion of clashing identities between coloniser and colonised; and although neither song nor film square up to any serious political reality, the potential for change is there in the iridescent sparks of both.

The filmic *Live and Let Die* involves a Harlem drug smuggler, known as Mr. Big, who plans to distribute two tons of heroin for free in order to put rival drug barons out of business so that he can become a monopoly supplier. Mr. Big is re-

vealed to be the alter ego of Dr. Kananga, the venal dictator of San Monique, a fictional Caribbean island where opium is being grown. Bond is sent out to investigate the deaths of three British agents who have stumbled upon Kananga's scheme, and soon finds himself mired in a world of Blaxploitation-esque gangsters. The aesthetic clichés include colourful clothing, trad jazz parades, the criminal underworld of Harlem, and the exotic voodoo tales of the Caribbean. Hamilton's *Live and Let Die* is certainly in the tradition of Blaxploitation, but as Harry M. Benshoff notes, "[s]ee[ing] characters at the movies or on television that 'look like you' can be tremendously validating to many minority groups and minority individuals, especially as such images challenge demeaning stereotypes or even lift a cloak of invisibility" (2015, 245). Furthermore, Stuart Hall writes that "[a]t a more complex level, [Blaxploitation films] placed blacks for the first time at the centre of the cinematic genres – crime and action films – and thus made them essential to what we may call the 'mythic' life and culture of the American cinema – more important, perhaps, in the end, than their 'realism'" (2013, 261). Though Hall also stresses the "binary structure of racial stereotyping" (ibid.) that might persist in Blaxploitation, too.

The fetishisation of the Caribbean Other is also to be located in Paul McCartney's theme song for the film, the lyrics for which came from a weekend McCartney spent reading Fleming's novel and then putting certain Ska/Reggae clichés into song form. The song reunited McCartney with Beatles producer George Martin, who produced the theme and arranged the orchestra. McCartney was asked to write the song by the film's producers Harry Saltzman and Albert Broccoli, who took a risk in asking the first rock musician to record a Bond theme. Paul McCartney and the Wings recorded "Live and Let Die" during the sessions for *Red Rose Speedway* in October 1972. The song can be said to essentialise Black identities and exoticise the Black Other. McCartney seems comfortable promulgating a series of musical clichés; his Bond theme song is reminiscent of the funk sound from earlier films such as *Shaft* and *The Mack*, and the middle eight is unadulterated cod white Reggae. Indeed, the Beatles and McCartney have a long history of self-consciously appropriating Black music; see, for instance, "Frank Sinatra's Party" (2019), in which McCartney adopts a faux Jamaican accent in the lines "Fee, fi, fu, fum / I'm not the only Englishman" (man to the Jamaican patois mun), joyfully employing a dub, fetishised, and exoticised elliptical Reggae beat.

The context of McCartney's "Live and Let Die" is his musical Liverpudlian family. McCartney's father worked at the Cotton Exchange in Liverpool and

played in a trad Jazz group called Jim Mac's Jazz Band. As McCartney himself notes,

[t]he big factor about Liverpool was its being a port. There were always sailors coming in with records from America, blues records from New Orleans. And you could get so many different ethnic sounds: African music, maybe, or calypso via the Liverpool Caribbean community, which I think is the oldest in England. There was a massive amount of music to be heard. So, with all these influences, from your home, the radio, the sailors and the immigrants, Liverpool was a huge melting pot of music. And we took what we like from all that. (qtd. in Du Noyer, 2007: xi).

McCartney's background and life open up a window onto the historical and musical contexts that shaped his and the other Beatles' love of Black music. McCartney played Ska with the Black calypso musician Lord Woodbine the late 1950s at the Jacaranda on Slater Street in Liverpool; and while refurbishing his cottage on the Scottish island of Mull, McCartney's DIY was accompanied by the sounds of a Trojan Reggae box set (Doyle 2013, 7). So, it came as no surprise that when he was asked to compose a Bond song, Ska, Bluebeat, and Reggae influences became the fulcrum of "Live and Let Die". This wasn't without precedence, though: the elliptical Reggae sound, with its emphasis on the third beat in the bar, had become something of a cliché at points in McCartney's career; for example his Ska parody "Ob-Bla-Di, Ob-Bla-Da" on The Beatles' *White Album* (1968). Just as the racial stereotypes of Hamilton's film can be understood in the context of other Blaxploitation films of the period, McCartney's theme song inherits the cultural milieu of *The Harder They Come* (1972), a Jamaican crime film which owes much of its cult status to its hit title song of the same name, written and performed by Reggae superstar Jimmy Cliff. McCartney's theme song might also be said to fit within the social and cultural context of Bob Marley's album *Catch A Fire* (1973). As such, "Live and Let Die" is a melange of Reggae, Rock, Funk, and Ska: a musical mongrel.

As with McCartney's song, so too is Hamilton's film a hybrid of genres: spy thriller, Blaxploitation flick, action adventure, and romance; and the film's larger preoccupation with hybridity is resonant most particularly in the dual character of Kananga/Mr. Big, played by Yaphet Kotto, who is at once dynamic and nuanced but also hampered by the casual racialism of Fleming's portrayal: a blend of admiration and colonial Othering. Kotto could hardly be said to be flattered

by the description of his character; Fleming primitivises Mr. Big as a feral beast with a “football of a head, twice the normal size and very nearly round. The skin was grey-black, taut and shining like the face of a week-old corpse in the river”, out of which shone “animal eyes, not human, and they seemed to blaze” (Fleming 1954, 74, 75). Fleming might profess admiration for the African American, but his description is the very definition of Edward Said’s Orientalism; in other words, exoticism which prevents white Europeans from treating the Orient and Africa as equals: the Other’s faults, as well as their attributes, are exaggerated, which obfuscates their equity. The cinematography of the film’s opening scenes in Harlem are purloined from Fleming’s prose. Every lazy stereotype of the novel is represented in Hamilton’s shots: the people that populate the film’s Harlem are clichés in the tradition of Richard Rowntree’s Shaft or Antonio Fargas’s Huggy Bear (who is the stereotypical bad Black man of the *Starsky and Hutch* series). The colourful primitivism of the exotic denizens of Harlem is contrasted with the smooth and sophisticated Bond. The film homogenises and exoticises the African American characters in Harlem: they are Othered and idealised, the very definition of casual racism. Conversely, Moore’s Bond is positioned as an ironic metropolitan sophisticate, an apologist for the British colonial project. Bond’s assumed superiority is evident throughout the film, in which a white-suited Moore wryly and sceptically raises his famous eyebrow at a series of Black clichéd tropes such as New Orleans Jazz bands, tarot card readers, and Jamaican voodoo which raises zombies from the grave.

The overall effect of both film and song is a strange biracial weave which gives rise to a third space of indeterminate identity. The binaries of the text may be upheld as Bond and the British Empire predictably emerge victorious, but the viewers and listeners are left with a powerful sense of colonial collision. Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* posits that art is often informed by a “double consciousness” (1993, 127); that is, in Gilroy’s terms, the concept that culture is African, American, Caribbean, and British all at once. Gilroy posits that hybrid culture is greater than the sum of its parts and that these ethnic collisions interconnect and produce fresh and new sounds and visions. Gilroy also argues that shared historical and cultural forms emerge from the African diaspora when crossed with British films and music. In other words, hybridity of culture rather than “essential” African identities. Both the film *Live and Let Die* and the song “Live and Let Die” represent the interconnection of transcultural zones produced by colonial history. Cinematic musical hybridisation is thus the third space in which music and national identity come about as a result of diaspora; or, as Benshoff puts it: “cultural identities [...] are constantly hybridized as they

move across the globe in space and time” (255). Josh Kun’s definition of “audiotopia” also supports Gilroy’s expansive concepts, as Kun sees art as “sonic spaces of effective utopian longings where several sites deemed incompatible are brought together, not only in the space of a particular piece of music itself, but in the production of social space and the mapping of geographical space that music makes possible” (23). McCartney’s “Live and Let Die” is a hybrid text of mixed musical forms, an audiotopia, and what Kun describes as “a musical space of difference where contradictions and conflicts do not cancel each other out but co-exist and live through each other” (ibid.).

To that end, it is worth noting that Fleming and McCartney’s British exoticism of the “Other” is, in part, to be couched in understandings of both men’s deep love for Jamaica and its people: Fleming loved Jamaica and purchased his holiday home (Goldeneye) there in 1946, whence he would write each of his Bond novels and stories; and McCartney first visited Jamaica in 1971, when Jamaican music first left a deep imprint on his psyche (The Paul McCartney Project n.d., n.p). Thus Fleming and McCartney are indulging in utopian exoticism; and although their respective works do much to promote Black actors and musicians, they are nevertheless cultural tourists who inadvertently promulgate stereotypes – though it is important to stress that Fleming and McCartney’s stereotypes are unconscious and are, in point of fact, filmic and musical indicators of a kind of Orientalism and absurdism ridiculing colonial attitudes.

The irony and humour of Hamilton’s film also transforms the casual racism of the novel into a third space of possibility. It is a hybrid film which is a radical mix of colonialism and anti-colonial sensibilities (though it must be said that the voodoo scene is completely unreconstructed colonialism). Although both the film and the novel are the products of a British colonial worldview, both contain the seeds of post-colonialism. Both pieces of work are Cold War thrillers that lament the passing of Britain’s colonial past. Fleming’s intention was to give a comforting and nostalgic fantasy to a Britain that was losing its Empire. This imperial decline resulted in a certain national anxiety and so the Bond figure is in a profound sense the embodiment of a colonial hero whose primary purpose is to reconstitute Britain’s self-image: a figure who perpetuates the myth of continued British global dominance (see Sandbrook 2015); that is, “the ultimate fantasy secret agent” who has “only succeeded because he consoled the British at a time when the nation was in inexorable decline” (McKay 2006, n.p.).

Dick Hebdige suggests that art is where identities collide: “[i]t is on the plane of aesthetics: in dress, dance, music, in the whole rhetoric of style, that we

find the dialogue between black and white most subtly and comprehensively recorded” (1979, 45). Fleming’s, Hamilton’s, and McCartney’s work collectively re-articulate notions of Britishness rooted in a sense of national belonging, but the work is also an outward-looking Englishness wherein post-colonial contexts have reframed gender, ethnicity, national identity, political message, and the popular cultural aesthetic. Hamilton’s film and McCartney’s theme song, then, are “sonic and social spaces where disparate identity-formations, cultures, and geographies historically kept and mapped separately are allowed to interact with each other as well as enter into relationships whose consequences for cultural identification were never predetermined” (Kun, 23).

REFERENCES

- Adams, Alex. 2017. “‘The Sweet Tang of Rape’: Torture, Survival and Masculinity in Ian Fleming’s Novels”. *Feminist Theory* 18(2): 137-159.
- Alexander, Camille S. 2020. “Cultural Appropriation and Capitalism Co-opting Blaxploitation in the Filmic *Live and Let Die*”. *International Journal of James Bond Studies* 3(1): 1-15. DOI: 10.24877/jbs.55.
- Alexander, Camille S. 2019. “Forget Mammy!: Blaxploitation’s Deconstruction of the Classic Film Trope with Black Feminism, Black Power, and ‘Bad’ Voodoo Mamas”. *Journal of Popular Culture* 52(4): 839-861.
- Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Benshoff, Harry M. 2015. *Film and Television Analysis: An Introduction to Methods, Theories, and Approaches*. London: Routledge.
- Doyle, Tom. 2013. *Man on the Run: Paul McCartney in the 1970s*. Edinburgh: Birlinn.
- Dittmer, Jason. 2008. “Ian Fleming’s Jamaica: Spaces of Legitimation and the Bond Age of Popular Culture”. *Caribbean Geography* 15(1): 14-34.
- Du Noyer, Paul. 2007. *Liverpool: Wondrous Place: From the Cavern to the Capital of Culture*. London: Virgin Books.
- Early, Gerald. 1999. “Jungle Fever: Ian Fleming’s James Bond Novels, the Cold War, and Jamaica”. *New Letters* 66: 139-163.
- Eco, Umberto. 1966 (1965). “The Narrative Structure in Ian Fleming”. In *The Bond Affair*, eds. Oreste Del Buono and Umberto Eco, trans. R.A. Downie. London: MacDonald. 32-75.
- Fleming, Ian. 1954. *Live and Let Die*. London: Penguin.
- Gilroy, Paul. 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso.

- Goodman, Sam. 2016. *British Spy Fiction and the End of Empire*. London: Routledge.
- Hall, Stuart. 2013. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage.
- Halloran, Vivian. 2005. "Tropical Bond". In *Ian Fleming and James Bond: The Cultural Politics of James Bond*, eds. Edward P. Comentale, Stephen Watt, and Skip Willman. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 158-177.
- Hebdige, Dick. 1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Routledge.
- Kinane, Ian. 2021. *Ian Fleming and the Politics of Ambivalence*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Kun, Josh. 2005. *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- McCartney, Paul. 2019. "Frank Sinatra's Party". *Egypt Station Explorer's Edition*. Prod. Greg Kurstin. Outtake.
- McCartney, Paul. 1973. "Live and Let Die". *Live and Let Die Soundtrack*. Prod. George Martin. United Artists.
- McKay, Sinclair. 2025. "The Spy Who Saved Us". *The Guardian*. 18 June. Online. <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2006/jun/18/film>.
- Mills, Richard. 2025. *The Beatles and Black Music: Postcolonial Theory, Musicology and Remix Culture*. London: Bloomsbury.
- The Paul McCartney Project. Unofficial fan website. Online. <https://www.thepaulmccartney-project.com/1971/12/holidays-in-jamaica/>.
- Picarelli, Enrica. 2015. "Elegance and Respective Sartorialism among young African Males". *Clothing Cultures* 2(2): 209-223.
- Said, Edward. 1968. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin.
- Sandbrook, Dominic. 2015. *The Great British Dream Factory: The Strange History of National Imagination*. London: Allen Lane.