

Somewhere in the twentieth century, the foot-stompin', dobro pluckin' songs of the sons and daughters of slavery were appropriated and transformed—Led Zeppelin borrowed from Lead Belly, Stevie Ray Vaughan from Buddy Guy—and at the turn of the millennium, blues became the soundtrack to yuppie ennui: John Mayer waxed disingenuous and Starbucked the blues, Kenny Wayne Shepherd shredded on *Letterman*, and the entire franchise of The House of Blues sprouted up like suburban mushrooms.

"I just know we don't play blues," says Dan Auerbach, the soul-soaked crooner and cocksure guitar-wrangler of The Black Keys. "The blues is a just touchstone for us, and John Mayer shouldn't be called 'blues.'" True, the duo of Auerbach and flat-tire drum-thumper Patrick Carney never grew up playing harmonica on a Biloxi porch, or sitting in the swelter of a 'Bama bus in the middle of July while humming tunes off pages torn from hymnals, but they are *bluesy*. Auerbach and Carney are both from Ohio (Akron, to be precise), and in the hyperbole-laden work of music writers, the mythologized normalcy of their suburban, working-class town is often cited. They met in high school, recorded their albums on a four-track in the garage, and miraculously showed up on soundtracks, video games, and notable "best-of" lists for the early parts of the 2000s. Ultimately, every music writer loves a rock-'n'-roll Cinderella story; tracing the path from the rags to (Keith) Richards, adding new musical terminology to the pop-cultural lexicon, or discovering the "little band that could." The Black Keys are the band you could have been in, the band that could have saved you and your hometown. But they are not the "everyband," and after four albums of stripped-down, minimalist rock recorded in garages, living rooms, and even an abandoned tire factory, the duo is going big. Now, their gritty sound is augmented with more complex musicality rather than mere amplification.

For their fifth album, *Attack & Release*, the visionary producer Danger Mouse (Gorillaz Gnarlz Barkley, and *The Grey Album*) approached the band with an unusual offer that catalyzed the project. "He just called us up," says Carney, "and asked if we were interested in making a record with Ike Turner that didn't sound like shit." Brian "Danger Mouse" Burton had been working with the controversial soul guitarist to create a return-to-form album following the actions of big-time producers who treated Johnny Cash, Loretta Lynn, and Neil Diamond like national treasures.

"Some of the stuff we ended up recording sounds like Screamin' Jay Hawkins," says Carney. "It was really cool, but ultimately it was taking too long. Dan and I just wanted to make a record." Turner's untimely death last December, however, ended the project prematurely, which opened up the possibility for a new Keys album. When Burton was asked if he'd be involved, his answer was a cautious yes. "I wasn't really sure I was going to work with them," Burton says. "It's difficult when you're a fan of somebody first, because you don't want to change what they're doing. I like to be very hands-on with a project and give it a certain sound of my own."

The pairing of the producer—well known for his recombinant masterwork of Jay-Z's *The Black Album* with The Beatles' *The White Album*—and The Black Keys, who belt out T. Rex-floorstompers, may seem incongruous. Yet, the band revels in the cross-pollinated musical climate, laying the bluesy soul spouted forth from Booker T. & the MG's over loud, almost old-school hip-hop-derived beats. "In high school, when I was with my buddies, we would listen to hip-hop," says Auerbach. "But when I was on my own and playing guitar, I would listen to [Delta blues guitarist] Son House and field recordings." The Black Keys' hybridization of musical styles is especially prominent in their collaboration with Burton on *Attack & Release*. The opening track, "All You Ever Wanted," begins with Auerbach's wavering vocals holding the notes just long enough over acoustic strums—a subdued start for an ordinary Keys' song—until the tune blows open with the thick howl of a Hammond organ. This is the new Black Keys, and *Attack & Release* is essentially their debut album, filling the band's usual skeletal song structure with the life-giving direction of Burton and his eclectic menagerie of vintage instruments.

"I really like keyboards and old synths, so I brought them into the studio. When I heard the songs, and I'd hear space or room for something else, I would just try it. I really like the darker side of music and I think the textures we use give it that feel," Burton says. This darkness, cinematic and rich, emerges in the haunting backing vocals of the cut "Psychotic Girl," as swirling choir vocals sway like Ennio Morricone conducting a New Orleans funeral march.

Far from cannibalizing the blues, The Black Keys are pulling from the myriad influences of American music and molding something distinct. It's not a matter of pure imitation or posturing, The Black Keys own it. "Everybody's trying to sound like somebody," Auerbach says. "That's how music gets made and passed down from generation to generation, especially American music, which is an explosion of music from all these different regions of the world, getting processed into these different styles. I've got guitar players that I really like and I can pretty much copy their sounds pretty closely, but it never quite sounds like them. It's always going to sound like me." Eat it, John Mayer.x

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# THE BLACK KEYS

