

Handout 2 – Jim Crow and Musical Integration

Richard Wayne Penniman, later known as Little Richard, was born in Macon, Georgia in 1932. Like all of the Southern U.S. states, Georgia was governed by a collection of state and local laws known as “Jim Crow” laws that regulated the segregation of whites from all people of color. In addition to legislating that everything from water fountains to public schools to concert halls be segregated as “white” or “colored,” Jim Crow laws enforced social subservience for people of color. The Supreme Court finally ruled school segregation unconstitutional in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case of 1954, thus, at the time of Richard’s initial success, desegregation was an issue on the minds of many people.

A few examples of Jim Crow segregation laws:

- **Alabama:** It shall be unlawful for a negro and white person to play together or in company with each other at any game of pool or billiards.
- **Mississippi:** Any person guilty of printing, publishing or circulating matter urging or presenting arguments in favor of social equality or of intermarriage between whites and negroes, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor.
- **Virginia:** Any public hall, theatre, opera house, motion picture show or place of public entertainment which is attended by both white and colored persons shall separate the white race and the colored race.
- **Maryland:** All marriages between a white person and a negro, or between a white person and a person of negro descent, to the third generation, inclusive...are *forever* prohibited, and shall be void.

Examples of Jim Crow social regulations:

- A negro male can not shake hands with a white female because it implies being socially equal. (If an African-American male offered his hand to a white woman he risked accusations of rape).
- Under no circumstance will a negro male offer to light the cigarette of a white female (it implied intimacy).
- Negroes are not to show public affection toward one another, especially kissing.
- Whites do not use courtesy titles when referring to negroes, for example, Mr., Mrs., Miss., Sir, or Ma’am. Negroes are called by their first names. Negroes must use courtesy titles when referring to whites, and must not call them by their first names.

Segregationist Reaction to Little Richard:

The “White Citizens Council,” a loosely arranged but well-funded network of pro-segregation associations throughout the south, claimed that Richard’s music was part of a broader “plot to mongrelize America” waged by desegregationists. In an official statement urging a White boycott of Rock and Roll, the WCC states that Richard performs, “the heavy-beat music of Negroes [that] appeals to the base in man, [and] brings out animalism and vulgarity.”

