

## The Musicians Behind the Monsters

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I would like share three anecdotes, which I hope will raise some important issues.

[NEXT] Anecdote number 1: Since 2015, I have used the R. Kelly song “Get Up On a Room” from his 1998 album entitled *R*. in my freshman musicianship classes as an example of a half-time feel. The song is not only a great meter example, but it is also a rare instance of yodeling in an R&B song. [NEXT] Recently, though—particularly in the wake of the Netflix documentary *Surviving R. Kelly*—[NEXT] I have been conflicted about using this example. While there may not be many other examples of R&B yodeling, there are many other examples of half-time feel that I could use. Why, then, include the music of someone currently indicted on charges of sexual abuse, child pornography, kidnapping, and forced labor?

[NEXT] Anecdote number 2: Fast forward to the summer 2017, when the Bruno Mars song “Versace on the Floor” was released as a single. I was especially enamored by the song’s sophisticated harmonic ingredients, as shown in my Nashville number chart. To give you a taste, let’s listen to the first prechorus. [NEXT] For me, a lot of the song’s allure resides in that exposed keyboard part, which sounds like it’s played by someone with an expert understanding of jazz voicings. So who is this expert keyboard player?

[NEXT] Wikipedia reveals that the keyboards were played by some guy named Greg Phillinganes. Who’s that? [NEXT] We can click through to discover that he was, among other things, the music director for Michael Jackson and is responsible for many if not most of those iconic keyboard parts on Michael Jackson’s albums. If that wasn’t enough to impress you, Greg Phillinganes was also the keyboard player for Stevie Wonder during the late 1970s.

[NEXT] Greg Phillinganes also has two solo albums, including his 1984 release *Pulse*. I decided to buy it, and I don’t understand how it was a commercial flop. It’s amazing, and it was pretty much all I listened to summer 2019. I’ll play an excerpt here, but that won’t do justice to the range of master arranging and songwriting that this album showcases. [NEXT]

[NEXT] Summer 2019 was also when the world was reacting to the HBO documentary *Leaving Neverland*, in which two men allege they were sexually abused as children by Michael Jackson. There have been similar accusations in the past, of course, but it made me rethink whether I should use songs by Michael Jackson in class. But I quickly thought of Greg Phillinganes, whose work on those Michael Jackson albums arguably represents the pinnacle of his career. If I cancel Michael Jackson, then I also cancel Greg Phillinganes, or at least that portion of his work. Is that fair to Greg Phillinganes? Is the loss of this portion of his artistic work simply collateral damage in the war on monstrous people? We do have other albums to enjoy the music Greg Phillinganes, including his work with Stevie Wonder. And Greg Phillinganes is still alive, so maybe he would tell us that he's OK with canceling Michael Jackson.

[NEXT] But it got me thinking. And this is my third and final anecdote. For many semesters, I have used the song "Black or White" by Michael Jackson as an example of a 12-bar blues song that is not in a blues style. I like this example for a number of reasons, including its theme of racial equality. Another reason I like it is the groovy bass line, which is harmonically clear and forward in the mix and thus easy for students to hear the harmonic changes. [NEXT]

[NEXT] This bass line, it turns out, was played by Terry Jackson, no relation to Michael Jackson. Who is Terry Jackson, then?

[NEXT] Well, Terry Jackson was a session bass player whose life was cut tragically short in a plane crash on March 16, 1991. Note that the song "Black or White" was not released until November of 1991. So Terry Jackson never got to hear his bass line on the radio or enjoy the phenomenal success that the song had. And while Terry Jackson has other work for which he is known, none of it is nearly as commercially successful as this one song. So if we cancel just this one song by Michael Jackson, there would be a lot less of Terry Jackson's bass playing in the world. And unfortunately, we can't ask Terry Jackson how he feels about that. He's dead.

[NEXT] So let's return full circle to that R. Kelly song I considered removing from my class. The list of personnel who worked on that album is rather lengthy, from

guitar players to recording engineers to video production crew. [NEXT] As I was looking through this list, I actually recognized the names of some of my old friends, Brian Garten and Jason Stasium, with whom I became close during my time working in New York City recording studios.

So what I'd like to suggest is that we consider the fallout of canceling monstrous musicians on the legacies of their musical collaborators. That is, we must consider the side effects of cancel culture. This issue is especially relevant for our students, the vast majority of whom will be employed in these behind-the-scenes roles. I can't offer a perfect solution. But perhaps part of the solution is to de-emphasize celebrity culture and to focus more on the identities of these supporting musicians. That's easier said than done, given the limited amount of time in a class. But maybe especially when dealing with the music of monstrous musicians, that is when context is critical.