

## Down at the Cross, by James Baldwin

[...]

But I cannot leave it at that; there is more to it than that. In spite of everything, there was in the life I fled a zest and a joy and a capacity for facing and surviving disaster that are very moving and very rare. Perhaps we were, all of us – pimps, whores, racketeers, church members, and children – bound together by the nature of our oppression, the specific and peculiar complex of risks we had to run; if so, within these limits we sometimes achieved with each other a freedom that was close to love. I remember, anyway, church suppers and outings, and, later, after I left the church, rent and waistline parties where rage and sorrow sat in the darkness and did not stir, and we ate and drank and talked and laughed and danced and forgot all about “the man.” We had the liquor, the chicken, the music, and each other, and had no need to pretend to be what we were not. This is the freedom that one hears in some gospel songs, for example, and in jazz. In all jazz, and especially in the blues, there is something tart and ironic, authoritative and double-edged. White Americans seem to feel that happy songs are happy and sad songs are sad, and that, God help us, is exactly the way most white Americans sing them – sounding, in both cases, so helplessly, defenselessly fatuous that one dare not speculate on the temperature of the deep freeze from which issue their brave and sexless little voices. Only people who have been “down the line,” as the song puts it, know what this music is about. I think it was Big Bill Broonzy who used to sing “I Feel So Good,” a really joyful song about a man who is on his way to the railroad station to meet his girl. She’s coming home. It is the singer’s incredibly moving exuberance that makes one realize how leaden the time must have been while she was gone. There is no guarantee that she will stay this time, either, as the singer clearly knows, and, in fact, she has not yet actually arrived. Tonight, or tomorrow, or within the next five minutes, he may very well be singing “Lonesome in My Bedroom,” or insisting, “Ain’t we, ain’t we, going to make it all right? Well, if we don’t today, we will tomorrow night.” White Americans do not understand the depths out of which such an ironic tenacity comes, but they suspect that the force is sensual, and they are terrified of sensuality and do not any longer understand it. The word “sensual” is not intended to bring to mind quivering dusky maidens or priapic black studs. I am referring to something much simpler and much less fanciful. To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be present in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread. It will be a great day for America, incidentally, when we begin to eat bread again, instead of the blasphemous and tasteless foam rubber that we have substituted for it. And I am not being frivolous now, either. Something very sinister happens to the people of a country when they begin to distrust their own reactions as deeply as they do here, and become as joyless as they have become. It is this individual uncertainty on the part of white American men and

women, this inability to renew themselves at the fountain of their own lives, that makes the discussion, let alone elucidation, of any conundrum – that is, any reality – so  
40 supremely difficult. The person who distrusts himself has no touchstone for reality – for this touchstone can be only oneself. Such a person interposes between himself and reality nothing less than a labyrinth of attitudes. And these attitudes, furthermore, though the person is usually unaware of it (is unaware of so much!), are historical and public attitudes. They do not relate to the present any more than they relate to the  
45 person. Therefore, whatever white people do not know about Negroes reveals, precisely and inexorably, what they do not know about themselves.

### Questions

1. Evaluate the sentence beginning “White Americans seem to feel...” (13-17). What is Baldwin trying to say about the difference between black and white culture in America? Is his critique of white music valid? Do you think this passage helps to explain in why black Americans have had and continue to exert such a large influence on popular music and culture in America?
2. The sentence about bread – “It will be a great day for America...” (32-34) – might seem like an odd and unrelated tangent in the essay (although remember that Baldwin is writing this essay in France). Why do you think Baldwin includes it? What is he trying to say about American culture? How does it serve as a transition to his point about the “joyless [ness]” of a white American culture that leaves people unable “to renew themselves at the fountain of their own lives”?
3. What are your thoughts on the final sentence of the excerpt here (45-46)?