

Sinners: A racist horror show

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Ryan Coogler's *Sinners* combines cartoonish monster-movie antics with a racist interpretation of history. It swims in the same, or very similar, ideological waters as the *New York Times*' reactionary 1619 Project. Taken at face value, the film is an argument for the virtues of maintaining "cultural purity" through racial separatism, a perspective not far from what is being promoted by the fascist right.

The film opens in 1932. Twin brothers "Smoke" and "Stack" Moore (both played by Michael B. Jordan) arrive in their hometown of Clarksdale, Mississippi, flush with cash from time spent working with Al Capone's criminal empire in Chicago. They purchase an abandoned sawmill and plan to turn it into a "juke joint" (an entertainment spot for music and gambling) for the black residents in the area, who lead oppressed and poverty-stricken lives in the Jim Crow South.

They recruit others to help launch the joint's opening night, including their younger cousin Sammie (Miles Caton), a talented blues guitarist whose preacher father fulminates against "sinful" music; Grace and Bo Chow (Li Jun Li and Yao), local shopkeepers hired to provide food and supplies; Delta Slim (Delroy Lindo), a veteran harmonica and piano player; Cornbread (Omar Miller), a sharecropper hired to work the joint's front door; and others. Along the way, Smoke and Stack encounter others from their troubled past, including Mary (Hailee Steinfeld), Stack's jilted former lover, and Annie (Wunmi Mosaku), Smoke's ex-wife and mother of his deceased child.

Meanwhile, Remmick (Jack O'Connell), an Irish immigrant, arrives at the home of Bert and Joan (Peter Dreimanis and Lola Kirke), pursued by a group of Choctaw Native Americans. The couple give him shelter despite the Choctaw leader's dire warnings that Remmick is not what he seems. A shot of Ku Klux Klan robes imply that the couple are motivated by racism. Remmick, a vampire, kills them and turns them into vampires under his control.

Back at the juke joint, Sammie gives a rousing musical performance that creates an otherworldly atmosphere within the dance hall. We see the presence of musical "spirits" from across time. African dancers from the distant past perform alongside DJs, hip hop artists, and others. The scene is something of a visual thesis for the film: the blues, hip

hop, and other forms of art are lumped together into a single racial-cultural mythology, a "black culture" which is under threat by white vampires.

Sammie's performance attracts Remmick's attention. He attempts to enter the juke joint, declaring that he and his fellow vampires "believe in equality" and are offering "fellowship and love" through the vampire clan's shared consciousness. In particular, he is hungry to assimilate Sammie, whose musical talents will supposedly allow Remmick to commune with his Irish ancestry. "I want your stories," Remmick says. "I want your songs. And you're going to have mine."

The second half of the film proceeds conventionally: garlic, wooden stakes, bloody fangs, etc. etc...

Sinners has achieved a degree of popularity and box office success. The fact that it is not a sequel, remake, or comic book adaptation has doubtless helped it stand out. One can imagine that the early scenes depicting the hardscrabble life of Depression-era Mississippi—the poverty, the hardship, the daily battle to eke out an existence—strikes a chord with viewers, white, black, or otherwise. Caton is a talented performer and musician. Lindo, as usual, makes an effort. Insofar as any of the reality of Jim Crow oppression makes itself felt, it is largely through his sensitive performance.

The film may also be benefiting from a perception that it represents something in opposition to the Trump White House, widely despised for its open appeals to white supremacism and racist-fascist violence. Certainly, a popular film could be made depicting Trump and his cabal as a gang of vampires, parasitically sapping vitality and resources from the population.

If Coogler had anything of the sort in mind, he has fallen extremely short. As in his *Black Panther* films, upper-middle class racialism imbues every aspect of *Sinners*. Even the title recalls the 1619 Project's assertion that racism is America's mythological "original sin" which dominates every aspect of social life.

Here, race is elevated to not only a supra-historical, but even a supernatural force. Sammie's performance in the juke joint brings together musical "spirits" of wildly differing musical styles, time periods, social contexts.

(Meanwhile, the Chows are shown enjoying the show alongside a spiritual representation of traditional Chinese opera, hammering home a reactionary notion that, even when people of different races occupy the same space, they still remain “culturally distinct” from one another.) The implication is that historical, social, or artistic context don’t amount to much and can be “transcended.” Race, however, is immutable.

By that logic, so is racism. The claim that “white people” have no culture and habitually “appropriate” it from others is a commonly held stupidity among the identity politics crowd. Even when the vampires are shown engaging in traditional Irish dancing or singing Irish-Appalachian folk music, it is Remmick’s hunger for Sammie’s music that drives the conflict. The viewer is led to believe that if Remmick were to lay claim to Sammie’s blues music, he would sap it of all its energy and assimilate it into his mindless, parasitic collective. Therefore, the only way to preserve culture is to refuse to invite whites into “black spaces” and maintain racial separation.

This reactionary, neo-segregationist theme was also present in Coogler’s *Black Panther* films, in which a fictional ethno-nationalist monarchy was depicted as a wondrous utopia. The fundamentally right-wing character of such themes is evident from the effusive praise the films received from white supremacists.

The racist conception of “cultural appropriation,” in which art and culture are viewed as the exclusive intellectual property of one or another race of people, is not only reactionary. It is based on fundamentally false and ahistorical notions of cultural development. Blues music was not developed in racial isolation. It came into being through a complex historical process integrating not only influences from traditional African music, but the direct and indirect influences of country, folk music, church hymns, the corridos of the Western frontier, and more. It evolved in constant conversation—and conflict, and friction, and rivalry—with the popular music heard in dance halls and churchyards, and the songs sung by workers in farm fields, railroad yards, textile mills...

The Delta blues of the 1930s was not primarily a form of political “protest” music. Still, one can listen to recordings of artists like Robert Johnson or Son House and *feel* something of the violent turmoil of the Great Depression itself; the rage, the sorrow, the deep hunger and yearning for more. Furthermore, the notion that “white” and “black” music developed in isolation from one another is a fantasy. Charley Patton, the musician usually given credit for founding or shaping the Delta blues genre more than anyone else, was a plantation worker in Mississippi (as so many of the early country blues players were) and believed to be of

African and Indigenous American ancestry. Patton, in the words of musicologist Robert Palmer, was a “jack-of-all-trades-songster-bluesman” who performed “deep blues, white hillbilly songs, nineteenth century ballads, and other varieties of black and white country dance music with equal facility.” (Palmer, *Deep Blues*, Viking Press, 1981, p.133).

The Delta blues, in turn, had an enormous impact on subsequent generations of musical artists, from later blues artists like the inimitable B.B. King to rock musicians like Chuck Berry, Eric Clapton, Jimmy Hendrix, Keith Richards, and countless others.

Frankly, if there is any “appropriating” being done here, it is the attempt by narrow-minded, privileged layers to lay exclusive claim to the history of blues music for the sake of their own selfish agenda.

Lastly, it should be noted that there is not only racism, but a distinct odor of anticommunism at work here. The depiction of Remmick and the vampires brings to mind the anticommunist tropes of McCarthyite propaganda: “Subhuman creatures who have lost their individuality are coming to destroy our culture under the guise of equality and fellowship!”

There is no indication that Coogler supports Trump or his fascist program. But if his ideas rhyme with those of the fascists it is because he is giving voice, whether he realizes it or not, to a general unease among the wealthy and complacent that the traditional barriers used to divide the mass of the population are rapidly eroding. It is precisely because old notions of racial or national-based culture are being worn down under enormous objective and historical pressures that certain layers feel the need to shore up these divisions, lest a catastrophe overtake them.

The massive economic and technological developments of recent decades have created the objective basis for the development of a new, genuinely *human* culture based on equality and international solidarity, not nationalism or racial mythmaking. It is to this development, and the struggle to realize it, that we orient ourselves.



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