Teach Me to Twist’: Black Music in White Dominated Spaces, 1960-1964

By the early 1960s, popular music was widely considered to have “desegregated,” both in terms of artists and audiences. The Billboard Hot 100 charts routinely featured a mix of white and black recording artists, and the incredible popularity of Motown and British Invasion artists among young black and white fans alike only reinforced popular music’s interracial appeal during this period. At the same time, civil rights organizations were staging direct action protests using mainly young people to forcefully desegregate white public spaces. These protests were widely covered by the media, and acted as visual cues to help teenagers envision the realities of integrated public spaces. Production and consumption of black music in white spaces could therefore provide parallels to these protests, and allow teens who did not participate in political activism to take part in an integrating adolescent culture. But even if popular music helped to normalize temporarily integrated spaces, it did not necessarily lead to any deeper understanding of the structural injustices the movement was trying to combat. White teens could be led to believe that integration had already occurred in many ways, while black teens’ concerns about how they would be treated in these spaces were often overlooked.

Beth Fowler received her Ph.D. from the Department of History at Wayne State University, and currently works as a Senior Lecturer in the Irvin D. Reid Honors College teaching classes in Urban, American, and Global Studies. Her research interests include popular culture and consumerism, the U.S. civil rights movement, youth culture, urban history, gender and sexuality, and Twentieth Century U.S. and African-American History. She is working on a manuscript which examines how rock and roll music, a racially-integrated cultural form that achieved popularity in the 1950s and 1960s, reinforced support for desegregation movements among black and white teenagers, while simultaneously crafting contemporary racial liberalism which obscures the racist structures that reproduce injustice. She is also co-chair of the Wayne State University Commission on the Status of Women PR and Marketing Committee.