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A Five Star Flop: The Collision of Music Industry Machinations, Genre Maintenance, and Black Britishness in 1980s Pop

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Introduction

- 1 In a 1987 interview with BBC Radio 1 DJ Mike Read, the members of the British pop group Five Star collectively stated that their hopes and wishes for 1988 were “to crack America” – that is, to break into the US music market by achieving success comparable to what they had thus far had in the UK.¹ Formed in 1983, the five-sibling group – sometimes referred to as the “British Jackson 5” – had released a string of highly successful songs in the UK, including six that had reached the top ten on the UK Singles Chart since the start of 1986. In February 1987, they received a prestigious BRIT Award for best British group. At the time, the complete list of previous winners of the award, introduced in 1977, was The Beatles, The Police, Dire Straits, Culture Club, and Wham!² Considering the class of international music celebrity they were among – all of the aforementioned groups being household names in 1980s USA – it would seem a foregone conclusion that Five Star “conquer America,” as one European headline declared. In fact, it seemed bizarre that they had not already.
- 2 This article centers Five Star’s 1988 album, *Rock The World*, as the key hinge in their dramatic fall from grace. Whereas each of the group’s three previous albums had produced at least three Top 25 UK Singles, *Rock The World* included only one – its first single, “Another Weekend,” released three months prior to the album. Following the

release of the full album on Monday 15 August, the group's highest-charting song would be the title-track, "Rock My World," appearing at Number 40 on the UK Singles Chart later that week.³ Set within the context of their publically pronounced pursuit of an American audience, *Rock The World's* dearth of charting songs and dismal sales, when compared to the group's previous releases, mark it as a seminal disappointment in Five Star's album catalogue. Despite relocating to Los Angeles in the early 1990s, the group never cracked the US market – their highest *Billboard* Hot 100 song being the 1986 single, "Can't Wait Another Minute," peaking just outside the Top 40 at Number 41 – and remain virtually unknown to most Americans.

- 3 In exploring this Five Star flop, I weave together several traditions of popular music study including: a production of culture approach, which considers the impact of organizational factors and decision-making surrounding the group's position in the music industry; a musicological exploration that attends to the history and boundary maintenance of key genres the group either aligned with or found themselves placed within; and a critical examination of how Five Star's distinct presentation of Black Britishness was received. With so little historical attention having been paid to Five Star,⁴ I adopt a pragmatic, *bricolage* approach, drawing from best-available sources such as: archives of music and entertainment journalism covering the group; extensive liner-notes from albums reissued by the London label Cherry Pop; a 48-page fan-booklet that accompanied a 1987 six-song "greatest hits" cassette promotion; and various YouTube videos and discussions about the group.⁵ Ultimately, I argue that Five Star's short-lived visibility in the UK and virtual invisibility in America have little to do with the overall quality of music they produced. Rather the group's untimely demise can be attributed to music industry maneuverings and machinations as well as to the ways that particular qualities of their music and image engaged with prevailing notions of race, genre, and authenticity.

The Five Star Story

- 4 The story of Five Star's formation begins with the three Pearson daughters, Doris, Lorraine, and Deniece, making up and performing dance routines for their mother, Dolores, on evenings when their father, a working musician, was away.⁶ Stedman 'Buster' Pearson was a guitar player who had moved to London from Jamaica as part of the post-war "Windrush Generation" in the late 1950s. Buster famously worked with prominent music artists including Wilson Pickett, Desmond Dekker, Jimmy Cliff, and Otis Redding.⁷ The Pearson children, also including brothers Stedman and Delroy, recount staying up late to wait for their father to return from studio sessions so that they could hear recordings of what he had worked on.⁸ In addition to being a studio and touring musician, Buster released a handful of singles of his own – mostly on K & B Records, a label specializing in lover's rock that he founded and ran in the 1970s.⁹
- 5 Whereas Buster had no particular desire for his children to enter the music industry, the girls had plans of their own. In 1982, when Buster was considering a song for his newly formed label, Tent Records, his teenaged daughters changed his thinking when they auditioned the song for him and begged to be the ones to record it. "I was so surprised when I saw what they could do," the future Five Star manager recounts.¹⁰ At Dolores's insistence, the two brothers joined the group rounding out the quintet. Although this first Five Star single, called "Problematic," failed to chart, a well-timed

performance on the British television program *Pebble Mill at One* brought the group to the attention of several UK record labels including RCA. Thus began a series of releases with the major label including their break through single “All Fall Down,” which peaked at Number 15 on the UK charts in June 1985. In a 1987 interview, lead singer Deniece mentioned that even before they had this first big hit, they used to sit in Doris’s room and “talk about going to America and being famous.”¹¹

- 6 Following “All Fall Down” and up until the release of “Rock My World” in July 1988, all but one of the Five Star singles released in the UK reached the Top 25, including five Top 10 songs on their second album, *Silk & Steel*, which was certified quadruple platinum and spent 58 weeks on the album charts. Following “Rock My World,” only one song would break the Top 50. Although a music act’s decline is often as much a gradual oncoming inevitability as a dramatic drop, and this could certainly be argued about Five Star, I nevertheless position the *Rock The World* album as the group’s definitive flop.
- 7 Five Star is generally described as a “pop” group with an orientation towards R&B. It seems clear enough that the group’s aspirations – affirmed by their almost immediate success – were to be considered in the same vein as transcendent Black American artists of the time like Michael and Janet Jackson, and Whitney Houston. The comparisons with the Jackson 5 were inevitable. During their career, the group would work with some of the same studio musicians and songwriters as the King of Pop. Janet Jackson, in turn, openly admired Five Star telling British television host Muriel Gray, “I think they’re great singers and I really love their work.”¹² Five Star’s 1986 hit song, “If I Say Yes,” had originally been written for Whitney Houston. After Clive Davis passed on the song, songwriter Michael Jay shared it with the group and it wound up being the second hit song co-written by Jay on *Silk & Steel*.¹³ As with Michael Jackson, who prior to his smash album *Thriller* struggled with being pigeonholed as a Black R&B/dance artist, ¹⁴ Buster Pearson explained, “I don’t want Five Star to make records for black kids only – and I don’t want them to make records for white kids only. It’s for everybody.”¹⁵ This tension between desiring to be transcendentally popular (or “pop”) and engaging with an industry that seeks to categorize artists to facilitate their legibility to particular music consuming markets, I argue, limited Five Star’s ability to cross-over the Atlantic and establish their popularity in the US.

Music Categories and Music Industry Machinations

- 8 To varying degrees, categories of music tend to be connected with categories of people. Yet this connection is not as straightforward as casual listeners sometimes assume. For example, the broad classification of music as “Black” (i.e. Black music), might be defined as music performed by Black people or, alternately, music consumed by Black people. It might be music that develops and matures within Black communities or music that possesses certain sonic signifiers that have been associated with any of the aforementioned understandings. These are just a few of the possible ways to think about this.¹⁶ Whilst these different definitions are not exclusive – indeed where they overlap we may find Black music’s most secure demarcation – they each contain spaces of contention if not objection. Black musicians perform many kinds of music that most people do not commonly identify as Black, including Black classical musicians and Black rock musicians, the latter performing a tradition that has its origins within Black

communities but that for many people no longer calls to mind Blackness.¹⁷ Many styles of music commonly thought of as Black have large White followings including blues, jazz, R&B, reggae, and rap. As with rock music, within certain contexts some of these genres may no longer even be thought of as Black (blues and jazz especially). Finally, despite the presence of musical markers – such things as complex polyrhythms, call-and-response, blue-note bending, and melismatic singing¹⁸ – there are instances where music performances just do not feel authentically Black. As Richard A. Peterson noted, “authenticity is a claim that is made by or for someone, thing, or performance and either accepted or rejected by relevant others.”¹⁹

- 9 Of course, the association between a style of music and a group of people is more meaningful for some genres than for other – R&B and country being two of the more prominent examples. Indeed, genres that invest the most in notions of authenticity connected to particular groups and/or lifestyles are typically on the periphery of the popular music market.²⁰ As Jennifer C. Lena explains, “songs intended for the pop music market typically have their distinguishing genre characteristics purposely obscured or muted in the interest of gaining wider appeal.”²¹ The “pop” genre, while at times described in terms of sonic markers, is in fact a dynamic and malleable category that’s designation is primarily based on what is selling the most, what is playing the most, and what is therefore most popular.²² For this reason, Anne Danielsen, in writing about musical crossovers, prefers the category of mainstream music, highlighting distinct threads of rock and pop/dance aesthetic influence.²³
- 10 While the rock aesthetic dominated popular music from the 1950s through the 1970s, by the 1980s a transcendent wave of dance-oriented mainstream music, featuring both Black and White artists, was emerging.²⁴ Thus, Five Star’s placement at the cusp of pop and R&B mirrored the aforementioned Black artists they aspired to emulate (i.e. the Jacksons and Whitney Houston). Yet even as some Black artists and musical styles break into the mainstream – indeed Five Star certainly succeeded in doing this in the UK market – the relationship between Black and mainstream music remains fraught.
- 11 In considering this tenuous standing, particularly as it applies to Five Star’s pursuit of American popularity, it is useful to adopt a broad perspective on how the music industry endeavors to position its commodities – artists, albums, and songs – towards the goal of achieving optimum success. The production of culture approach, examines the structural arrangements through which symbolic elements of culture, such as popular music, are created, manufactured, marketed, distributed, and consumed.²⁵ In doing this, the approach focuses on the interactions of six productive facets: technologies, laws and regulation, industry structure, organizational structure, occupational career, and market. My discussion of Five Star’s pursuit of *market* popularity, and their ambitions to make it big in America, specifically highlights the *structure of the music industry* they engaged with and the *organizational arrangements* they observed in crafting their product – including their music and how it was exhibited through single releases, music videos, concerts, and their celebrity image.
- 12 Five Star’s position as an R&B act raises important questions about the connection between race and music. Having one foot in the R&B world was clearly part of the group’s self-fashioning. However, the American market’s insistence on containing them within raced music genres – as evidenced by their early placement on *Billboard’s* Black and Hot Dance/Disco charts and lack of comparable success on its Hot 100 Chart – confounded their goal to mirror their musical heroes. Despite being one of the genres

most linked to a category of people, R&B, in its most credible exhibition, insists on a range of authenticity-work beyond racial ascription alone.²⁶ In my discussion of these performative credentials, I toggle between R&B, as a pervasive yet historically unsettled Black music genre, and one of its prominent counterparts: *soul*.

- 13 R&B's unsettled standing as a raced musical genre can be gleaned through its fluctuating appearance (and disappearance) in *Billboard's* chart history. The *Billboard* R&B charts officially began in 1949, replacing "Race Records," as an effort to capture an array of post-war tastes in Black dance music that were notably distinct from more religious oriented gospel traditions.²⁷ While *Billboard's* R&B Chart exists today, it curiously disappeared from the magazine for over a year between late 1963 and early 1965. Then between 1969 and 1982, it was replaced by the designator "Soul." Finally, during Five Star's reign, from 1982 to 1990, *Billboard* used the term "Black."²⁸ The appearance of a "Black" music chart seems like a clear enough linkage between race and music, despite the fact that many non-Black artists appeared on these charts (most notably George Michael's dominance in 1989). The "Soul" designator, which emerged in the throes of the Black Power Movement, strikes me as a more illuminating effort to emphasize tangible if not essential qualities of Blackness in music.²⁹ By considering the ways in which Five Star's brand of Black Britishness was legible and illegible in America's R&B/Soul/Black music configuration, one better understands the conditions that precipitated their fall from relevance around the release of their fourth album.

The Five Star Model for (American) Success

- 14 Michael Sylvester, who wrote the liner notes for the series of Five Star reissue albums, characterizes the group as "having always been focused on US success."³⁰ When Five Star signed to RCA UK in 1984, A&R Director Peter Robinson, who considers the group one of his first and most successful signings, set out to ensure "that the Five Star sound would appeal to pop and soul fans in the UK and the US."³¹ His pursuit of the US market included intentionally holding off on releasing "System Addict," the new-wave-oriented song that he considered the most commercially viable on their debut album, *Luxury Of Life*. Instead, Robinson chose to release a string of "club oriented soulful" singles that he hoped would help to establish a US following. Robinson believed that if America's first exposure to Five Star was as a pop group, it would be difficult for them to build a sustained following and be taken seriously in the US Dance/R&B market.³²
- 15 In a 1986 article appearing in the British music trade publication *Radio & Records*, Robinson explained two relevant distinctions he saw between the US and UK markets. First, the American market was incredibly segmented compared to in the UK, where the promotional power of BBC Radio 1 and television programs like *Top of the Pops*, "allows all kinds of music to receive exposure."³³ Second, Robinson observed that success in the British market required releasing several singles in rapid succession – typically before an album was delivered. Because the British charts were determined almost entirely by sales (as opposed to airplay), they moved faster and were less consistent than their American equivalents. Accordingly, UK labels had to maintain artists' momentum by putting out new songs "with a frequency that the rest of the world finds impossible to keep up with."³⁴ In the US market, by contrast, more time could be dedicated to building an artist's or album's foundation for sustained radio play, which would result in more consistent attention and sales through an enduring position on the charts. This

means that British labels needed to be selective about which of their many singles – often coming out before the album itself – were released in the US. Indeed, one great pastime that I have observed among contemporary Five Star fans – often found in comments on YouTube videos – is to remark on which UK singles they think would have done well if released in the US. There are indications that during the mid-1980s, RCA Records was organized in a way that made it additionally cumbersome and costly for its UK division to issue US releases. While I cannot confirm this, Robinson’s observations imply that releasing a song in America was understood to involve a bigger investment.

- 16 Even before Buster Pearson had the idea to start a music group with his five children, he was in the process of starting a new, “soul” record label.³⁵ Although a handful of other artists released music on Tent Records, it developed into a label primarily dedicated to housing Five Star releases. When RCA showed interest in the group, Buster, who had experience both running his own label and witnessing the darker side of the industry, secured a licensing agreement with the major label while retaining Five Star’s independent affiliation with Tent. Under this family-run label, which went on to become “one of the most successful independent companies in the country,” the Pearsons controlled the music they recorded and released as well as the collaborators they worked with.³⁶

Cracks in the Royal Armour

- 17 As the father, manager, and occasional producer of the “First Family of British Pop”, Buster Pearson looms large in Five Star’s career trajectory.³⁷ When they visited America to promote their first album, Buster is reported to have turned down an offer from Disney to produce a Five Star television show because he did not feel the group was established enough yet.³⁸ The group also declined an invitation from George Michael to be the opening act for Wham!’s farewell concert in 1986.³⁹ Buster made the decision not to incur the costs of travelling to Los Angeles to record the vocals for their third album, *Between The Lines*.⁴⁰ At least one of the major producers of the album raised questions about this decision by complaining about the constant barrage of fans they had to deal with outside of UK studios, owing to the previous album’s success.⁴¹ Buster appears to have been the primary decider of which songs to release (and what to include as b-side). He made the decision to cut ties with Nick Martinelli – the American R&B producer who produced the two songs on *Luxury Of Life* that had the most success in America (i.e. “All Fall Down” and “Let Me Be The One”) – after Martinelli made his youngest daughter Deniece cry during a recording session.⁴² Whereas in the public record Buster Pearson is consistently regarded by producers, songwriters, and record label executives as a great person and someone who was easy to work with, there were clearly moments, most notably around the release and reception of *Rock The World*, where his creative control did not seem to be in harmony with the shrewd and calculating business interests of RCA. As music sales waned and Five Star became less of a moneymaker for RCA, it seems possible that the hassle of an independent label and controlling father made the group less of a priority for the larger company.
- 18 Through the mid-1980s, RCA had been a music label in fluctuation. Having signed major artists like Diana Ross to what was at the time the most lucrative record deal in history, the label found itself heavily in debt during its years of affiliation with Five Star. In

1986, the German company Bertelsmann acquired controlling interest in RCA leading to a new RCA/BMG partnership. This union was described by RCA President Elliot Goldman as leading to the restructuring of “many elements of the company’s creative, sales, and marketing functions.”⁴³ Part of this reorganization may have contributed to the disappointing sales of 1987’s *Between The Lines*, however, 1988’s *Rock The World* was the first Five Star album under the official RCA/BMG imprint.

- 19 Nineteen eight-eight was also the year when Peter Robinson, the man who had signed Five Star to RCA, left the label. Following Robinson’s departure, “the group’s management” (i.e. Buster) is said to have grown “increasingly dissatisfied” with the relationship with the major label.⁴⁴ Popular music sociologists John Ryan and Michael Hughes discuss the music industry’s decision chain – including choices about songwriting, publishing, recording, releasing, marketing, and distributing – and the important role that music producers play in steering these processes.⁴⁵ Five Star worked with several different producers on each of their first two albums. For their third and fourth albums, the group worked with fewer producers (and songwriters) as group members became more involved in aspects of the decision chain. The one constant through the first three albums was the executive producer duo of Peter Robinson and Buster Pearson. Dennis Lambert and Richard James Burgess, the two outside producers brought in to work on the group’s disappointing third album, *Between The Lines*, both express, with what sounds like a touch of regret, that by the time they came on board all the songs for the album had already been chosen by Robinson and Buster.⁴⁶
- 20 As the abovementioned situation with Nick Martinelli illustrates, Buster had the strain of balancing his role as a manager/executive-producer with his role as a father – understandably, protecting his family came first. Early on in their careers, Buster had realized that “the clubs were no place for his children.”⁴⁷ Speaking about these early touring experiences, middle-daughter Lorraine remarked, “It’s really good that [Buster’s] around because I just don’t feel secure without him.”⁴⁸ The father sought to safeguarding his children from both the external evils of an exploitive music industry and the internal tensions that were potential by-products of success.
- 21 Five Star fashioned itself as a team with each member having a distinct contribution. Oldest sibling Stedman, who had briefly studied fashion in college, designed their clothes; next in line, Doris, choreographed their dance routines; Lorraine, who published a novel in 1989, was often positioned as the group’s spokesperson; youngest daughter, Deniece, did most of the lead vocals (although three of the other four took their turns); and youngest, Delroy, was an aspiring producer. Yet Buster intentionally sought to reduce competition among the siblings. In selecting the b-sides for their early releases, he at once claimed to have made the decisions based on “merit” and to have selected songs highlighting each child “on purpose.”⁴⁹ In this same spirit, of the ten songs preselected for *Between The Lines*, four were written and eventually produced by Pearson children.
- 22 While the system had worked – at least in terms of Five Star’s UK success – through the first two albums, with the setback of *Between The Lines*, the group paused at the start of 1988 to gather themselves and to put greater intention towards regaining their previous fame and cracking America. This attempted comeback, however, took place under a reorganized RCA/BMG label, without their steadfast executive supporter Peter Robinson, and amidst significant shifts that were changing the landscape of popular

music in the late 1980s. Jason Toynbee is one of several scholars who marks the 1980s as the start of a “third moment” in popular music – following the Tin Pan Alley era and rock’s dominance of the 1950s through the 1970s. The mainstream of this third moment is more globally focused, foregrounding African diasporic styles like reggae and rap.⁵⁰ Consistent with this, and foretelling of rap’s 1990s dominance of the Black American music imagination, Loren Kajikawa considers 1988 (the year *Rock The World* was released) “rap music’s greatest year.”⁵¹ In addition to these organizational changes and shifts in the character of pop music, as the Pearson children became increasingly involved in songwriting and producing – a pattern that continued with *Rock The World* – it is worth contemplating how family/group dynamics impacted their pursuit of success.

The Original Ungendered Boy Band

- 23 Five Star’s difficulties in sustaining success were compounded by their status as what I refer to as an ungendered boy band. Allowing for the fact that the group features three young women who very much dominate their vocal performances, Five Star in most other ways fits Maria Sherman’s framework of an early boy band.⁵² Following Sherman, boy bands are made up of attractive members in their teens and early twenties, wearing matching clothes, performing highly choreographed dance routines, singing songs with catchy hooks (largely upbeat love songs), and are generally understood as being assembled and managed by one key person.⁵³ In fact, one of Five Star’s closest American counterparts is the group New Edition, which Sherman situates as the definitive boy band.⁵⁴ Just as New Edition and New Kids on the Block had Maurice Starr, and the Backstreet Boys and NSYNC had Lou Pearlman, Five Star had their father, Buster Pearson. Despite their attractiveness, members of boy bands do not typically engage in public relationships and their “moment in the sun” is usually a five-year window.⁵⁵ At some point, they get old and a new, more youthful group comes along. Five Star checks all these boxes. Thus, the notion that by the late 1980s the group would feel pressure to remake their image to avoid an impending demise fits what has become a well-worn music industry pattern.
- 24 Perhaps most consequential here, the popular status of boy bands, though culturally celebrated, is critically denigrated as frivolous.⁵⁶ I believe this is particularly true within the serious spaces of Black musical performance, unless artists are embraced as children of the community. This would not be the case for the five Pearson siblings. It is notable that despite his background in Black Music – including establishing one of the most prominent R&B labels in England (i.e. Dome Records) – Peter Robinson did not sign another prominent Black act during his time at RCA.⁵⁷
- 25 Upon its release, *Rock The World* received generally favorable reviews. Several reviewers picked out the tracks written by Deniece as being the highlights of the album.⁵⁸ A self-described “rock chick,” Deniece was uniquely talented as a singer and songwriter.⁵⁹ One of the first recorded songs she penned, an instrumental piece called “First Avenue” that appeared as the b-side of 1985’s “All fall Down,” was nominated for a Grammy Award for Best R&B Instrumental Performance, making it Five Star’s only Grammy nomination. Five Star producers, Dennis Lambert, Richard James Burgess, and Peter Robinson all praise Deniece as an extraordinary artist with tremendous vision and leadership. Robinson refers to her as “the great solo UK R&B singer that got away,”

explaining that “when we were recording tracks, the American musicians were open-mouthed at how brilliant a vocalist she was.”⁶⁰ Following the boy band model, Deniece at some point would have felt pressure to break away from her siblings and pursue a solo career. “It is a shame that Buster’s understandable desire to keep her focus on the group meant that she never had a shot at a solo career” Robinson remarked.⁶¹

Rocking The World – A Five Star Flop

- 26 In 1988, when Five Star re-emerged from a short public break, they were described as donning a “new, more mature look and slightly different sound.”⁶² Producer/songwriter Leon Sylvers III had been brought in with the goal of getting Five Star “back onto R&B radio in the US.”⁶³ Sylvers, who had a solid track-record working with American groups like Shalamar, The Whispers, and Midnight Star in the early 1980s, was once said to be second only to Quincy Jones in fashioning an “urban, sophisticated sound... designed to appeal to the widest range of black musical tastes.”⁶⁴ Sylvers wrote and/or produced five songs on *Rock The World*, including the pre-released “Another Weekend,” which became the groups last Top 25 UK Single (reaching Number 18) and reached Number 23 on the US Black Singles Chart. Just days before the album’s release, the UK trade-publication *Music Week* opened with a 2-page promotion layout celebrating “Five Years of Five Star,” highlighting the success of their previous singles and albums, and claiming that *Rock The World* was “The Best Yet!”⁶⁵
- 27 All of these promotional materials, including the “Another Weekend” video, showcased the group’s new image. In an apparent effort to update their youthful “squeaky clean” reputation and appeal to a broader audience, Five Star embarked on what some fans refer to as their “Bad phase” – referencing the stark similarities with the black-leather aesthetic featured on the cover of Michael Jackson’s album from the previous year.⁶⁶ The appearance of Deniece, who wore a bountiful blonde wig reminiscent of Dolly Parton, was easily the most dramatic of the five. Whereas for some fans this new look might have matched the edgier rock-inspired sounds of “Another Weekend,” “Rock My World,” and a later single called “Brand New World,” its inconsistency with their prior image of polished refinement open the group up to more criticism than praise.⁶⁷
- 28 Both the “Rock My World” video and album cover photoshoot took place in a rock quarry, and featured group members wearing black leather and studs – these images were also used on the covers of two single releases. The proliferation of photos from this one shoot, combined with the drastic image makeover that they represented, gave Five Star’s new *Bad*-look the effect of being ubiquitous. Yet one of the major television promotions that accompanied *Rock The World*’s release featured the group in their recently purchased Sunningdale residence, Stone Court – described as a “luxurious 50-room mansion,” originally built as a residence for the Queen’s mother.⁶⁸ A week prior to the album’s release, Five Star appeared on the BBC Saturday morning television program *UP2U* making breakfast, with their hair and make-up completely done. In the feature, they also showed off their in-house recording studio and their fleet of expensive cars – including a Rolls Royce, Ferrari, Lamborghini, and twenty-five-foot metallic blue Mercedes stretch limousine.⁶⁹ Buster had insisted that they all purchase expensive cars, even before Delroy has his driver’s license, because he believed that if they were going to be big stars they needed to look the part. This included moving into a luxurious home that matched the neo-Byzantine aesthetic, which the group had

cultivated with the release of their debut album.⁷⁰ In hindsight, the disjuncture between Stone Court as a spectacularly glamorous residence and the raw leather look that Five Star sought to establish with *Rock The World* likely fueled perceptions that the group's new image amounted to little more than a tastelessly marketed scheme. Rather than re-enchanting their fans, Five Star's apparent emulation of Michael Jackson was generally received as tactless and trite.⁷¹

- 29 Popular music success depends in large part on the quality of the relationship between performers and consumers – especially in the fast-paced world of British popular success where Five Star was situated. An important dimension of authenticity in popular music insists that artists remain “true to the authentic self” they present themselves as.⁷² The mixed message created by *Rock The World*'s “new image,” did more to erode than create trust among the media and Five Star's fans. Perhaps just as costly, as the group's music failed to achieve past success, their ostentatious luxury made them easy targets for sensationalized news stories.
- 30 In 1987, writer Alan Wayne had credited Five Star with “steering well clear of the kind of publicity which normally dogs the rich and famous.”⁷³ While it may be inevitable that at some point, especially as artists' celebrity begins to falter, the media will turn on them, starting in 1988 Five Star provided the tabloids with plenty of material. In the media, Stone Court was consistently presented with a curious combination of star-struck fascination and cynicism at the sheer indulgences of these young Black teenagers/twenty-somethings. Stories abound about such things as their extravagantly expensive cars, Lorraine's five-day engagement to actor Eddie Murphy – where the latter accused the Pearson daughter of misleading him as a publicity stunt – the cost of their in-home recording studio, and the family's alleged bankruptcy.⁷⁴ Such negative press continued in the years following *Rock The World*. In fact, when the group began working on their subsequent project, RCA/BMG considered renaming them “Vector” in an effort to distance them from their tainted name.⁷⁵ Following the bank's repossession of Stone Court, this sustained negative press contributed to the group's decision to relocate to Los Angeles in the early 1990s.⁷⁶

The Reception of Black Britishness

- 31 From school-girls' dreams of making it big in the States to the reported five promotional/recording trips they had made across the pond by Christmas 1986, Five Star's pursuit of the US market had been longstanding.⁷⁷ Notably, the group's weeklong promotional visit to Los Angeles in September 1987 has been implicated in their third album's disappointing reception in the UK. Traveling to America limited Five Star's ability to promote the first single from *Between The Lines* at home – thus, “Whenever You're Ready” stalled just outside the UK Top 10 (reaching Number 11).⁷⁸ As Peter Robinson explained (see above), promotional appearances on television and other media increased album sales, which in the British market directly impacted chart placement.⁷⁹ The lead single's disappointing chart performance ended the momentum from *Silk & Steel*, which had produced five Top 10 hits including a Number 4 song just four months earlier. Five Star never had another Top 10 song, and the lackluster performance of *Between The Lines*, set the stage for the additional pressure to return to greatness and to finally “crack America” with *Rock The World*.

- 32 Yet in their pursuit of the US market, Five Star had additional factors working against them. Despite the 1980s successes of R&B influenced White British, new-wave groups like Wham!, Culture Club, Tears for Fears, Spandau Ballet, and Flock of Seagulls, as a Black British musical group in the American market, Five Star found themselves contained within raced music categories that were not consistent with their self-fashioned image. Where White British groups were permitted to be transcendent, such luxuries were not afforded to Black Brits. At that moment in the US music market, Black Britishness was primarily legible through diasporic frames that gestured towards the Caribbean aesthetic of Toynbee's aforementioned "third moment," which Five Star, despite their Jamaican heritage, had intentionally distanced themselves from (see below).
- 33 Black music in Britain was historically seen as something that came from abroad – with the first generation of Black migrants from the Caribbean and West Africa celebrating the music from their homelands.⁸⁰ By the 1970s, a second generation of children of Caribbean/African heritage, who also recognized their steadfast Britishness, began developing hybrid music styles and youth cultures of their own.⁸¹ Despite the popularity of Caribbean music, most notably roots reggae, many of the visuals surrounding Black (musical) cool – such as fashion and hairstyles – came from the US. Simply put, Jamaican record labels did not have the resources to compete with America in crafting album packaging and other visual promotions.⁸² Thus, these Black British youth of the 1970s created their own homegrown music forms – such as lovers' rock, Brit funk, and later the underground sound-system DJ scene – building on Caribbean and American musical-visual influences. Much of this music was characterized by a low frequency bass materialism that Paul Gilroy conceptualizes as a diasporic force.⁸³ By the late 1980s, when Five Star was making their renewed bid for American musical acceptance, the most prominent sounds of Black British pop in America were the bass heavy diasporic inflections of groups like Soul II Soul and Loose Ends.⁸⁴
- 34 Five Star's first released song, 1983's "Problematic," conveyed some of this Caribbean vibe. Yet with the single's lack of commercial success, the group abandoned this style. "Problematic" remains an outlier in Five Star's career – something seldom commented on even by their most ardent fans. The song's pulsing rhythm, bubble gum keys, and accented vocals call to mind their British reggae contemporaries, Musical Youth. Yet despite Buster Pearson's background in roots reggae, this was not his children's musical heritage. In interviews, Five Star members mention growing up listening to Nat King Cole, Connie Francis, Elvis Presley, Sam Cook, and Motown acts among others. According to Lloyd Bradley, the second generation of Black British youth which Five Star were a part of resisted the sounds of sufferation connected with roots reggae, gravitating instead towards music conveying "middle-class aspirations, happy, sophisticated music [that celebrated] dressing up and having a good time [and] didn't display a great deal of obvious disadvantage."⁸⁵ Indeed, this gravitation toward the good life seems pronounced with the Pearson children. Yet rather than being immersed in the generative spaces of musical creativity for this generation – the streets, the clubs, and even the youth clubs – as a family music group managed by their father, Five Star was internally focused. "Where British children are influenced by their friends, we are influenced by our parents," Doris once remarked.⁸⁶ Thus despite growing up in the working-class community of Romford, Five Star appears to have had a sheltered upbringing and musical career.

- 35 Where the Five Star story and sound draws comparisons to 1980s American groups like the abovementioned New Edition as well as family groups like The Jets and DeBarge, each of these US group's rise to fame included difficult back stories featuring financial hardships, dodgy characters, and, eventually, being chewed-up and spit out by an exploitive industry. Although Five Star's moment in the sun did not end well, for a time Buster Pearson largely succeeded in protecting his children from many of the "bad things about the music industry."⁸⁷
- 36 During their promotional visits to the US – for example, in 1985 when Five Star appeared on American Band Stand – their English accents were celebrated as a novelty but at the same time placed them, both geographically and socially, outside the key sites of R&B/Soul resonance. R&B emerged in the mid-1940s and was crystalized as a *Billboard* music chart by the end of the decade around a constellation of urban music styles performed by recent Black migrants from the American South. As such, it has recognized roots in Southern blues, boogie-woogie, and to some degree gospel and jazz. The geographic core of R&B heritage, then, is the US South with its full maturation realized in Midwestern and Northeast cities.⁸⁸ Yet R&B was simultaneously integration music, which provided a soundtrack to collective movement during the Civil Rights era. By the early 1960s, the genre had become an "incoherent" category in large part owing to the extensive crossover of R&B songs into the pop category and the number of middle-of-the-road songs appearing on the *Billboard* R&B charts.⁸⁹ As the decade continued, a British Invasion of White artists, steeped in blues and R&B sounds would send the music category into disarray.
- 37 Soul, as a musical reference, was popularized during the late 1960s as a more direct index to Blackness and serious engagement with racial politics. Notably, soul was talked about as a performance practice and a quality that a music performance could include rather than as a category unto itself – you didn't perform soul, you had soul. DJ Nathaniel Magnificent Montague described it as, "the last to be hired, first to be fired, brown all year-round, sit-in-the-back-of-the-bus feeling," explaining that you have to live with Black people "or you don't have it."⁹⁰ Taking a jab at British invaders, Montague went on to characterize soul as "one thing our English friends can't imitate."⁹¹ Emily Lordi concurs that soul involves a "habit of thinking, a logic."⁹² Citing Geneva Smitherman, Lordi explains that it is "derived from struggle, suffering, and having participated in the Black Experience."⁹³ Soul is thus "a logic of resilience... that turns debilitation into advantage" as well as a stylized "will to proceed" enacted through a range of musical practices.⁹⁴
- 38 Although technically Five Star's US aspirations did not involved "cracking" *Billboard's* "Soul" music chart – in 1982 the "Soul" chart was renamed "Black Music" in an effort to account for "the diverse nature of music which the field now encompasses"⁹⁵ – their credibility as artists was determined through what I consider an American R&B/Soul/Black music matrix. In the US music marketplace, the group lacked the requisite credentials and departed in important ways from the soul logic that was key to their favorable reception.⁹⁶ Their Britishness failed to communicate resilience and if anything, when paired with their sheltered and mostly luxurious image, noted privilege.

Conclusion – Five Years of Five Star

- 39 In considering Five Star’s flop, Sherman’s aforementioned point about the five-year lifespan of boy bands is one of her most prescient. Five days before the release of *Rock The World*, Five Star gathered to celebrate their fifth anniversary as a group. To celebrate the occasion they had a four-foot cake made that featured, of all things, “the Hollywood hills made out of chocolate and a huge ‘Hollywood’ sign made out of vanilla” – a symbol of their aspirations to make it in America.⁹⁷ In highlighting the limitations surrounding their independent family-led record label, their illegibility as a Black British pop/R&B act in the American music market, as well as aesthetic decisions around *Rock The World*’s releases, I have perhaps glossed over the fact that most popular youth groups eventually fade away. Yet Five Star remains remarkable both for the brightness with which they briefly shined in the UK and the fact that they remain virtually unknown in the US.
- 40 As an astounding illustration of the conservatism of the British music industry, as late as 2020 Five Star remained the only Black or women-led group to receive the BRIT Award for best group.⁹⁸ Had they been a White British group, I imagine their brand of pop/R&B – sprinkled with touches of rock (à la Tears for Fears) and new wave (à la Spandau Ballet) – would have been as legible in the US music market as their second-wave British Invasion peers. Had they been a Black American group, one wonders if their performance and presentation of Black music would have been stitched with more of the audible and visible markers of resilience that the US market valued.
- 41 As an admission of Five Star’s doomed potential following *Rock The World*’s flop, the group’s final album under their RCA/BMG contract was a Greatest Hits release in 1989. After signing with Epic later that year, the group went on to release two additional albums.⁹⁹ Notably, the first of these (a self-titled album) was entirely written and co-produced by Pearsons and, curiously, the first two singles featured Doris as the lead singer. Yet neither of these albums did anything commercially. There was no US chart placement whatsoever and their highest British placement was Number 53. Five Star also released two largely unrecognized independent albums in 1994 and 2001 – today physical copies of both albums are quite rare.
- 42 In the twenty-first century, as group members moved on with their lives, Five Star periodically got together to perform at various 1980s music nostalgia festivals in the UK. Of the siblings, Delroy and Deniece (now spelling her name Denise) have remained the most musically active. The former lives in California and continues to work as a music producer – his most noteworthy success coming with the 1990s R&B group Immature. The latter released an independent album, *Imprint*, in 2014. In addition, Denise Pearson has appeared on BBC’s *The Voice* and starred as Michael Jackson in the West End version of *Thriller – Live*. Buster Pearson passed away in 2012.
- 43 At some point, Denise started performing solo as Five Star using four backup dancers/singers. One can reason that this was in an effort to continue her performing career in the 1980s nostalgia market without having to rely on the availability and whims of her siblings. Her older sister, Lorraine, is reported to have been “disappointed and shocked” when she learned about the replacements while doing a random online search for old photos of the group. “Denise is my sister and I love her,” Lorraine said, “but I don’t like her very much.”¹⁰⁰ In summer 2020, around the same time that Denise released a benefit record (“You Raise Me Up”) in support of UK National Health Service

workers, the other four Pearson siblings released a rerecording of their 1985 hit “Let Me Be The 1” – under the name “Viision (featuring Five Star)”¹⁰¹ – a song that originally had Deniece singing lead.

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NOTES

1. Five Star - Bank Holiday Interview by Mike Read (Broadcast 31 August 1987 - 5 Star), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YUYA-KZoF2g>, accessed 5 January 2022.
2. Though the first award was issued in 1977, it was not institutionalization as an annual award until 1982.
3. "Rock My World" peaked at Number 28 just prior to the album's release.
4. To my knowledge, there are no official biographies or existing popular music scholarship on the group.
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6. WAYNE Alan, *Five Star: A Success Story*, London, Omnibus Press, 1987, p. 17.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 7; SYLVESTER Michael, *Five Star: Luxury Of Life - Special Edition* [Sleeve Notes], London, Cherry Pop, 2010.
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10. WAYNE, *Five Star*, p. 17.
11. LOWE Richard, "Could You Cope With Being A Member of Five Star?" *Smash Hits*, August 26, 1987, p. 26.
12. Janet Jackson on Five Star (interview 1987 The Tube), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqAkqPSCQPs>, accessed 16 December 2021; see also WAYNE, *Five Star*, p. 38.
13. SYLVESTER Michael, *Five Star: Silk & Steel - Special Edition* [Sleeve Notes], London, Cherry Pop, 2010.

14. For example, although Jackson's 1979 *Off The Wall* album had been an unprecedented commercial success, Michael only received two Grammy Nominations, winning "Best Male R&B Vocal Performance" (VOGEL Joseph, *Man In The Music: The Creative Life and Work of Michael Jackson*, New York, Vintage Books, 2019, p. 59).
15. GARDINER Mike, "Five Star: The World's Most Successful Indie Band" *Record Mirror*, vol. 33, n° 18, 1986, p. 21; WAYNE, *Five Star*, p. 24.
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22. In the case of American popular music, this is complicated by the longstanding phenomenon of Black musical styles driving popular music innovation as well as the popular music market's orientation towards younger consumers who, in terms of race and ethnicity in contemporary America, look demographically different from older generations.
23. DANIELSEN, "The Sound of Crossover."
24. *Ibid.*; TOYNBEE Jason, "Mainstreaming, from Hegemonic Centre to Global Networks," in HESMONDALGH David and Keith NEGUS, (eds), *Popular Music Studies*, London, Arnold, 2002, p. 149-163.
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32. *Ibid.*
33. ROBINSON Peter, "Hits Across the Ocean", *Radio & Records*, August 22, 1986, p. 43.
34. *Ibid.*
35. GARDINER, "Five Star," p. 20.
36. WAYNE, *Five Star*, p. 9; see also GARDINER, "Five Star;" SYLVESTER, *Luxury Of Life*.
37. WAYNE, *Five Star*, p. 4.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
40. SYLVESTER Michael, *Five Star: Between The Lines – Special Edition* [Sleeve Notes], London, Cherry Pop, 2012.
41. *Ibid.*
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46. SYLVESTER, *Between The Lines*.
47. SYLVESTER, *Luxury Of Life*, p. 5.
48. WAYNE, *Five Star*, p. 44-45.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
50. TOYNBEE, "Mainstreaming"; see also DANIELSEN, "The Sound of Crossover."
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53. *Ibid.*
54. In fact, New Edition re-recorded one of Five Star's earliest songs, "Hide and Seek," for their 1984 self-titled album; *ibid.*, p. 41.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
56. *Ibid.*
57. FITZROY, "Peter Robinson," p. 10.

58. SYLVESTER, *Rock The World*.
59. PEARSON Denise, *Imprint – Deluxe Edition [Sleeve Notes]*, London, Baronet Entertainment, 2014.
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61. *Ibid.*
62. SYLVESTER, *Rock The World*.
63. *Ibid.*
64. GAYLE Stephen, “SOLAR Empire Strikes Gold”. *Black Enterprise*, July, 1982, p. 40.
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66. SYLVESTER, *Rock The World*.
67. *Ibid.*
68. WORSNOP Jonathan, “Inside Five Star’s £5 Million Mansion,” *News of the World Sunday Magazine*, vol. 31, 1990; Five Star - Bank Holiday Interview by Mike Read.
69. WORSNOP, “Inside Five Star’s £5 Million Mansion”; Stone Court (Five Star’s House 1988): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x56SZud1jEw>, accessed 17 Decembre 2021.
70. SYLVESTER, *Luxury Of Life*, p. 5.
71. Doris Pearson credits the leather look to her sister Deniece’s desire to dress “to suit the song [Another Weekend]” (SYLVESTER, *Rock The World*). Nevertheless, the decision to so noticeably emulate Jackson was risky. Even the established King of Pop had received considerable critical backlash for his black leather makeover; and let us not forget that the disparaging nickname “Wacko Jacko” had its origins with the British press (VOGEL, *Man in the Music*, p. 138, p. 150).
72. PETERSON, “In Search of Authenticity,” p. 1089.
73. WAYNE, *Five Star*, p. 46.
74. AKASS Bill and Frank THORNE, “Exit Eddie,” *Daily Mirror*, October 24, 1988, p. 3; SYLVESTER, *Rock The World*; SYLVESTER Michael, *Five Star – Deluxe Edition [Sleeve Notes]*, London, Cherry Pop, 2013.
75. SYLVESTER, *Rock The World*.
76. SYLVESTER, *Five Star*; SYLVESTER, *Rock The World*; SYLVESTER, *Shine*.
77. WAYNE, *Five Star*, p. 41.
78. SYLVESTER, *Between The Lines*.
79. ROBINSON, “Hits Across the Ocean.”
80. BRADLEY, *Sounds Like London*.
81. *Ibid.*
82. *Ibid.*
83. GILROY Paul, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London, Verso, 1993.
84. This of course does not include Nigerian-British singer-songwriter Sade, whom I consider a musical anomaly.
85. BRADLEY, *Sounds Like London*, p. 243.
86. GARDINER, “Five Star,” p. 21.

87. WAYNE, *Five Star*, p. 14.
88. BRACKETT David, *Categorizing Sound*.
89. *Ibid.*
90. *Ibid.*, p. 269.
91. *Ibid.*
92. LORDI, *The Meaning of Soul*, p. 8.
93. *Ibid.*
94. LORDI, *The Meaning of Soul*, p. 151, p. 44.
95. Editorial Statement, *Billboard*, June 26, 1982, p. 3.
96. LORDI, *The Meaning of Soul*.
97. "Five Star: The Legend Continues." *Smash Hits*, August 10, 1988, p. 14-15.
98. In 2021 the Best Group award went to the girl group, Little Mix, which features two non-White members (of three total).
99. These six albums, released on RCA and then Epic between 1984 and 1991, are generally considered the Five Star music catalogue.
100. "Five Star's Lorraine Pearson Lifts the Lid on Band's Blazing Rows and Her Tryst with Eddie Murphy," *Mirror*, June 4, 2018, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/3am/celebrity-news/five-stars-lorraine-pearson-lifts-12642895>, accessed 27 May 2021.
101. Apparently Viision is producer Delroy's current *nom de plume*.

ABSTRACTS

In a 1987 interview with BBC Radio 1 DJ, Mike Read, members of the British pop group Five Star collectively stated that their hopes and wishes for 1988 were "to crack America" – that is, to achieve comparable success in the US music market to what they had in the UK. Formed in 1983, the five-sibling group had a string of highly successful UK releases between 1985 and 1987, including six Top 10 hits. In 1987, they received a prestigious Brit Award for Best British Group, largely based on the success of their second album, *Silk and Steel*. Yet following the release of Five Star's fourth album, *Rock the World*, in August 1988, the group's highest-ranking song would reach a paltry Number 49 on the UK Singles Chart. This article centers, *Rock the World*, as the key hinge in Five Star's dramatic decline. The group never cracked the US market – their highest *Billboard* Hot 100 song being the 1986 single, "Can't Wait Another Minute" (peaking at Number 41) – and remain virtually unknown to most American music fans. By combining a production of culture approach to organizational sociology, a musicological examination of the history and boundary maintenance of key genres, and a critical assessment of how the group's Black Britishness was presented and received, I argue that Five Star's short-lived visibility in the UK and invisibility in the US had little to do with the quality of their music and can be attributed to industry politics and the transnational impacts of prevailing notions of race, genre, and authenticity on popular music reception.

« Conquérir l'Amérique ». Autrement dit remporter sur le marché de la musique aux États-Unis un succès comparable à celui qu'ils ont obtenu au Royaume-Uni : tel est le vœu pour l'année 1988 que prononcent les membres du groupe pop britannique Five Star au micro de Mike Read, animateur sur Radio 1 BBC, dans une interview menée en 1987. Formé en 1983, le groupe composé de cinq frères et sœurs enchaîne les succès en Grande-Bretagne entre 1985 et 1987, classés à six reprises dans le top 10 des meilleures ventes, avant de recevoir en 1987 le prestigieux Brit Award du meilleur groupe britannique, en grande partie grâce au succès de leur deuxième album *Silk and Steel*. Mais leur quatrième album, *Rock the World*, sorti en août 1988, voit sa chanson la mieux classée n'atteindre qu'une modeste 49e place dans le Single Chart britannique, amorçant le déclin dramatique de Five Star. Le groupe ne parviendra jamais à percer sur le marché américain – sa meilleure chanson au Billboard Hot 100, le single de 1986 intitulé « Can't Wait Another Minute », ne se hisse qu'à la 41e position – et restera pratiquement inconnu de la plupart des amateurs de musique américains. En associant une sociologie des organisations fondée sur la production de la culture, avec un examen musicologique de l'histoire et de la définition des frontières des genres musicaux, et une évaluation critique de la façon dont l'identité britannique noire du groupe a été présentée et reçue, cet article montre comment la visibilité éphémère de Five Star au Royaume-Uni, et son invisibilité aux États-Unis, ont peu à voir avec la qualité de leur musique, mais doivent être attribuées aux politiques de l'industrie et aux impacts transnationaux des notions dominantes de race, de genre et d'authenticité sur la réception de la musique populaire.

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