

## *Introduction*

Writing to Gertrude Stein in Paris at the end of the Second World War, the novelist Richard Wright, then in New York, said he had heard that a point of solidarity between black and white soldiers in the segregated forces in Europe was 'Negro hot music'. Jazz, Wright suggested to Stein, seemed to be 'a sort of password'. He went on to tell Stein that when he was growing up in Mississippi, his grandmother had forbidden the playing of swing records on the family phonograph. In her devout mind, blues and jazz were associated with the wrong kind of person and the wrong kind of activity – a self-protective respectability not uncommon among the black population in the South. Wright himself grew up with the understanding that this music belonged to the inferior part of a race that was struggling to pull itself upwards. But when he went north to Chicago, 'white boys would corner me and tell me the deep meanings buried in a solo trumpet'.

Wright was heartened by these cross-cultural dialogues, which suggested that the racial cauldron could yet become a melting-pot. The African-American in his song – no matter if the song had words or not, whether it was uttered by a man or a woman, played on a Steinway or a homemade guitar – was endlessly posing the question: 'What did I do / to be so black and blue?' And the white boys who buttonholed Richard Wright, to talk about the 'deep meanings' encoded in the music, suggested that this question, and the history which prompted it, affected them too, even if they were not fully aware of it.