



Dædalus

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American Music

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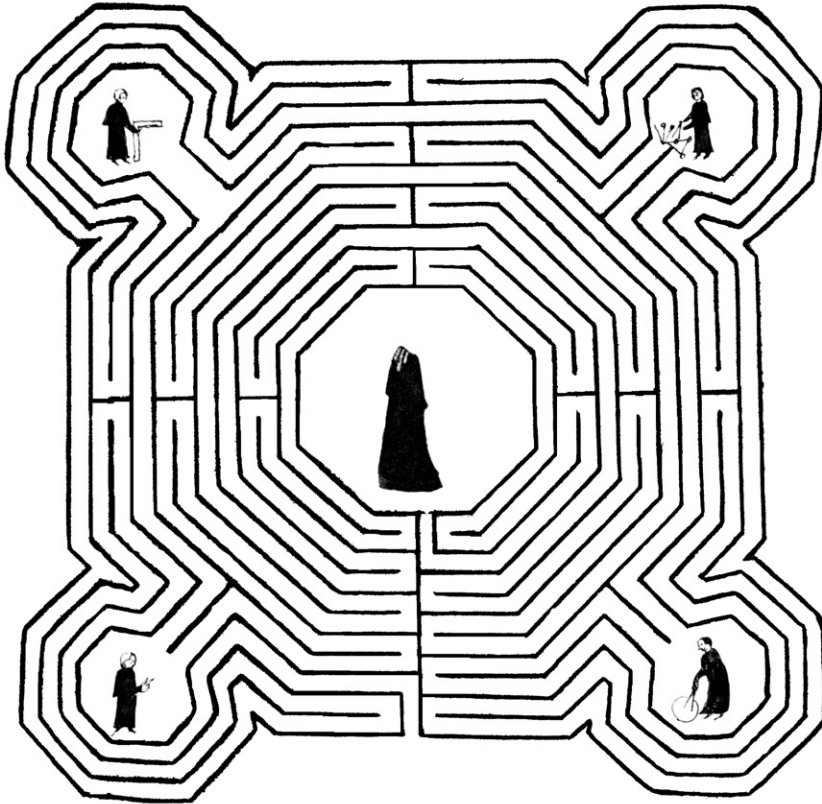
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*Swing: From Time to Torque (Dance Floor
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Introduction: This is Our Music

Gerald Early

The twentieth century has many names: the Century of the Child, the American Century, the Century of Genocide, the Age of the Atom, the Era of Mass Culture, the Age of the Welfare State, the Age of Totalitarianism. But the most apt characterization of the last century may be historian Tim Blanning’s “the Age of the Triumph of Music.”¹ To be sure, in Western society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, music was an incredible force – from the creation of national anthems to the rise of folk music as an expression of the authentic, from wild adulation for certain composers and performers (Beethoven, Liszt, Rossini, Nellie Melba, Jenny Lind, among many others) to the popularity of a highly racialized American minstrelsy that became the cornerstone of the American musical theater. (The rise of the piano as a major performance vehicle and source for composition and the rise of the parlor piano as a signifier of domestic bourgeois taste and manner are themselves extraordinary occurrences of the modern musical sensibility.²) The twentieth century did not invent the popular obsession with music, but it did, in both degree and kind, transform the nature of the obsession.

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In the twentieth century, thanks to recording technology, music became ubiquitous; audiences could experience it divorced from live performance and, as studio technology improved, divorced from the *constraints* of live performance.³ (This brings to mind legendary rock and roll producer Phil Spector’s observation about his bombastic teen tunes of the

1950s and 1960s, his “wall of sound” or “the Wagnerian approach to rock ’n’ roll”: in effect, he intimated, as did Motown founder, Berry Gordy, that he did not write songs; rather, he *made records*, which the performers could not possibly reproduce on stage.) Recording, first, made music performance portable; second, the recording studio – the wizard’s chamber of musical effects and reworkings – made music sound different from live performance, and thus changed the performer’s artistic objectives in making music for a record; third, it made music as sound a new type of property that the music industry found increasingly difficult to control, especially as technology continued to improve and the public found it easier to obtain or reproduce musical performances without legal permission. All of these developments combined to make audiences experience music in a way that no previous generation ever had or could. Recording made us, to borrow a phrase, an empire of the ear.

But it was not technology alone that so changed how we perceive music. The twentieth century brought with it a redefinition of how we see our psychic selves, our life stages, our ways of making or deriving meaning from experience. Psychologist Stanley G. Hall gave us the adolescent or teenager, a distinct life stage between childhood and adulthood. With this also came the ancillary emergence of the young adult, someone between the ages of 18 and 22 (although the genre of young adult literature is marketed largely to high school students). The rise of the teenager and young adult as a sensibility and a market, coinciding with the rise of twentieth-century popular culture, which appealed greatly to the young and the idea of youth, had a tremendous impact on popular music, as these demographics became a pronounced and fanatical consumer of music created to appeal to fantasies about sex, love, friendship, and rebellion. The

major revolutions for which American popular music of the twentieth century has become known – blues and jazz; rock ’n’ roll and its various schools, from punk and heavy metal to alternative; rap and hip-hop – were ignited by how young people identified with these new expressions. (The fact that people’s musical preferences are formed by the end of young adulthood and do not alter for the rest of their lives only intensifies the connection between music and the young.)

The twentieth century saw the concept of identity and a preoccupation with it become all-consuming: identity became both a social conundrum and a form of liberation. Even the use of the word *identity* increased greatly, not only in academic and belletristic writing but also in journalism. To be sure, music had been associated with social and political status, the hegemonic legitimacy of taste, psychological need and religious inclination, nationalism, gender, and race – all constituents of identity – before the twentieth century; but as music in mass society became virtually inescapable and easily accessible, its connection to identity, its role in the construction of identity, became central to its reality. Doubtless, the audience for any particular form of music continued to be an “insider” taste culture, but music became for most of its adherents a moral value as well as a pleasure principle, a frame through which to comprehend reality and access feelings. In the marketplace of twentieth-century music, various musical forms sought their niches of power and influence, if not through sales, then through the critical opinion of fans and experts as well as through the support of authoritative institutions such as universities, colleges, and foundations.

One striking example of the connection between music and identity is the lyrics of the Isley Brothers’ 1975 hit “Fight the Power” (#1 on the R&B chart, and #4 on

the pop chart): “I try to play my music / They say my music’s too loud / I try talkin’ about it and get the big runaround / And when I roll with the punches I get knocked on the ground / By all this bullshit going down.” The use of obscenities was still rare at this time in popular music, and so all the more startling, but here it expresses a kind of cultural militancy and autobiographical “realism” that would characterize later rap and hip-hop, for which this song – a stripped-down funk tune built on the percussive use of synthesizers and guitars – was a huge inspiration. The lyrics could describe the attitude of a musician or a music fan. (At the time the record was released, loud boom boxes were omnipresent among young blacks, who offered their musical preferences with the defiant pose of the ghetto, daring anyone to silence them.) Although it did not clearly articulate anything beyond a slogan, the song was obviously intended to be interpreted politically, and it became something of a political anthem, a near-perfect musical marriage of rebellion, resentment at being misunderstood, and hip cynicism about the social hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie, an emotional brew reflecting the feelings (or imagined feelings) of many of the young people who bought the record. The song was an exquisite, aggressively stated declaration: “This is My Music”; or, from the standpoint of the collective, “This is Our Music.” One wonders whether to underscore “this” or “our” or both. At the time this song was current, I was a student living in a rundown apartment in West Philadelphia, and some male neighbors invariably started to play the record at two or three o’clock every morning as loud as their stereo would permit, doubtless mimicking the defiance celebrated in the song and, I suppose, daring any of us who were trying to sleep to call the police, which apparently no one ever did. It was

enough to make me a staunch counter-revolutionary.

Nothing has combined the technological spread of music and the compulsive pursuit of meaning through personal identity more than the arrival of film. No medium has done more to present a greater variety of music, and no medium has done more to augment music’s charismatic power by marrying it to dramatic visual imagery. Viewers today might think themselves overwhelmed with film soundtracks heavily dependent on rock and rap music, but one has only to watch a fair number of films from the 1930s through the 1950s to realize how much Latin music and jazz (or something that could pass for it) were used as both soundtrack and source sound in film. Often, when films use rock, hip-hop, or some form of dance-oriented jazz, the hope is to inject a sense of rhythm, an aural element that makes the film feel propulsive and energetic. What, among other things, the various revolutions in American popular music gave audiences was more and more varieties of rhythm. (Johnny Cash’s lyric, “Come on and get rhythm, when you get the blues,” could be an American motto. There are many such lines in American music praising the glories of rhythm.)

Film also gives viewers music resembling “serious” or “classical” music. Composers like Elmer Bernstein (*The Magnificent Seven* and *Ghostbusters*), Max Steiner (*King Kong* and *Gone with the Wind*), Maurice Jarre (*Lawrence of Arabia* and *Doctor Zhivago*), Franz Waxman (*Sunset Boulevard* and *The Bride of Frankenstein*), and Dimitri Tiomkin (*High Noon* as well as the theme song for the TV show *Rawhide*) all wrote memorable film scores that, in some cases, became as popular as the hit films in which they were used. When I saw the most recent Superman film, *Man of Steel*, most of the audience, including me, was disappointed that John Williams’s soaring

theme written for the Superman films of the late 1970s, starring Christopher Reeve, was not used, a sign of how powerfully evocative movie music has become. James Horner's score for the 1997 film *Titanic* sold thirty million copies, becoming the highest selling orchestral soundtrack in the history of recorded music and one of the most commercially successful records ever released. And how many ballparks play the theme from *The Natural* whenever a home team player hits a home run! Everyone knows the music even if many have never seen the film. The recorded version of Ennio Morricone's scores for Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) and *Queimada!* (1969) were highly sought after by young lefties. The first album I ever purchased was at the age of twelve: I did not buy a Marvin Gaye album, a Dionne Warwick album, a James Brown album, or an album by the Beatles or Johnny Mathis, my favorite performers at the time. My very first album was the soundtrack of the second James Bond film, *From Russia with Love*. At the time I thought it was the best music I had ever heard from the best movie I had ever seen. I am particularly pleased that in this issue of *Dædalus* dedicated to American music we have a thoughtful essay by Charlotte Greenspan on movie music and its impact on how we collectively remember music.

Several other essays in this collection deal with race, an unavoidable topic when considering American popular music. Blacks have been a major creative presence in American popular music and dance, in part because whites have always thought that blacks performing music and dance was a "natural," "inherent" act by people who constituted a sort of Rhythm Nation.⁴ This Rhythm Nation was largely responsible for the twentieth-century revolutions in American popular music that I mentioned earlier: blues and jazz, rock 'n' roll

and its variants, and rap and hip-hop, all of which were seen initially as cultural threats – the "Africanization" or, more vulgarly, the "niggerization" of American society and taste. Music has been classified and sold by race since the invention of "race" records in the 1920s; as whites have seen blacks as anti-bourgeois, as uncorrupted primitives, black music has been romanticized as "oppositional" in its aesthetic or "authentic" in its feeling. In other words, whites need "black music," a category that whites themselves created as something by which to define blacks and to define themselves. (Ronald Radano handles this topic more fully in his essay for this volume.) If black music is something that blacks alone play, and if they are naturally superior at playing it, then black music is a trap for blacks. It is what they *should* play, so playing anything else is, by definition, "unnatural." Composer Quincy Jones once told me of the difficulty he had convincing Hollywood moguls that he could write a standard film score. "There was no problem with me writing a jazz score but arranging for strings was something they didn't think a black guy could do," he said.

Race, to borrow a phrase, bestows on American popular music "a complex fate," offering us a sense of certitude about something that seems both arbitrary and ambivalent as the industry strives to wring a fresh surprise from the expected. If by "black music" we mean music that from concept to recording is completely in the hands, hearts, and minds of African Americans, then there is in fact not a great deal of black music in America. It is sometimes surprising for people to learn how much black music has been the result of the active creative collaboration of whites with blacks. Yes, whites stole and crassly imitated more than their share of black music; but as critic Stanley Crouch once said to me, the chord changes in George Gersh-

win's "I Got Rhythm" served as the basis of half the tunes of the bebop repertoire. If whites stole, blacks found a way to get even by stealing right back, or taking back what they felt was rightly theirs. Indeed, where would jazz be without Gershwin and his peers? White composer Bill Challis wrote more charts for the black Fletcher Henderson band than Henderson ever wrote for Benny Goodman. Most of the session musicians in Memphis who played on the great soul classics of the 1960s were whites. Every hit record of the Shirelles, the Drifters, and Dionne Warwick, to name only a few noted black performers, was written by whites. Marvin Gaye wanted to sing like Perry Como, Motown mogul Berry Gordy's favorite singer was Doris Day, and P Diddy stole Led Zeppelin's "Kashmir" note-for-note to use as an exit-music rap for the 1998 film *Godzilla*. I recall how surprised Quincy Jones was when, during one of our phone conversations, I mentioned in passing that pianist Keith Jarrett is white. "I thought he was a brother," Jones said. The wiry Afro, the rhythmic gyrations while playing, and the occasional gospel-like inflections in his playing have probably made many think Jarrett is black. If you thought Jarrett black, does that make his 1975 *Köln Concert*, the best-selling solo piano recording ever, "black music"?

When filmmaker Ken Burns interviewed me for his 2001 documentary *Jazz*, I told him that jazz ought not to be called black music, not because it is a disservice to the music, but because it is a disservice to African Americans, who should be congratulated for having inspired an art form that became so universal precisely because it borrowed so freely from anything it could find, from Latin music to klezmer to gospel riffs to hard rock. From the black American jazz musician, I learned that to be a great artist was to steal well from all sources and then tell everyone it is a quest for your

roots. "My God," bassist Charles Mingus once shouted, "I've got roots!" Jazz, I thought when I was a teenager, was a way for black people to discover that they could aspire to contain multitudes. When I bought the soundtrack of *From Russia with Love* as a kid, I thought myself to be so cosmopolitan because it *wasn't* black music, because I could absorb other musics. It made me feel like a jazz musician stealing riffs. American popular music is all about desperate commerce, the genius of the great song hook that rises like a God from the ashes of bad taste, and the affectionate and brutal theft of cultural exchange. Avant-garde alto saxophonist Ornette Coleman spoke for all of us – about the sense of possession and outreach that the music we identify with makes us feel – when he titled his 1960 Atlantic recording "This is Our Music." On the album cover is a photo of the band: three black musicians – Coleman himself, trumpeter Don Cherry, and drummer Ed Blackwell – and white bassist Charlie Haden. I bought the record as a teenager because I loved the title and the cover photo more than I loved the music.

I thank my two coeditors, Mina Yang and Patrick Burke, not only for their splendid essays but for being instrumental in bringing this issue together. I am enormously grateful to them. I thank all the contributors for producing these fine pieces and for taking such care with their writing. I learned so much from all of them. I am especially grateful to St. Louis Symphony conductor David Robertson, who took time from his busy schedule to write about the role of the conductor in today's world of music. The last and only issue of *Dædalus* that was dedicated to music was "The Future of Opera," published in 1986. As the great tenor saxophonist Lester Young would say, it has been a long time between choruses and a long time between drinks.

- ¹ Tim Blanning, *The Triumph of Music: The Rise of Composers, Musicians, and Their Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), esp. 1–6.
- ² See Arthur Loesser, *Men, Women, and Pianos: A Social History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954); and Stuart Isacoff, *A Natural History of the Piano: The Instrument, the Music, the Musicians – from Mozart to Modern Jazz and Everything in Between* (New York: Knopf, 2011).
- ³ In their book *The Future of Music: Manifesto for the Digital Music Revolution* (Boston: Berklee Press, 2005), David Kusek and Gerd Leonhard argue that music has come full circle as a listening experience, with digitization making music no longer a product but a service, just as it was in the days before recording. They argue that the recording industry should stop treating music as a product and start treating it like a utility, charging a fee for people to access any sort of music they want, when and how they want it, without the necessity of having to “own” it, much as we treat people’s access to water. For Kusek and Leonhard, the days of music as a product was a distortion of musical experience. Music was never meant to be a product as other art forms are.
- ⁴ *Rhythm Nation* is the evocatively racialist title of Janet Jackson’s 1989 album, a mix of hip-hop, funk, and pop that was number one on the *Billboard* R&B chart. Janet Jackson is the sister of the late singer/dancer Michael Jackson.

The Screamers

Patrick Burke

Abstract: While screaming during popular music performances (at least loudly amplified ones) has become unremarkable and even expected, the mid-twentieth-century United States witnessed a series of debates over the appropriateness and significance of screaming. These debates, fraught with moral judgment and often open panic, focused on issues central to American popular music: sexuality, race, class, and the rights and responsibilities of the individual. Tracing the discourse surrounding screaming audiences from the nineteenth century to the present reveals that observers have associated female screamers primarily with sexual impropriety while male screamers more often have been depicted as a potentially violent mob. While commentary on screaming often reinforces racial and gender stereotypes, screaming maintains its subversive power because it effectively dramatizes the tension among social expectations, group solidarity, and individual freedom.

In 2011, my friend of over twenty years, Jeff Burke (no relation), posted to YouTube a short video with the straightforward title “I Saw Iron Maiden.” It’s only two-and-a-half minutes long, and as of this writing it’s still online.¹ The video records Jeff’s good times at a recent concert by the titular heavy metal band, best known for such albums as *The Number of the Beast* (1982) and *Powerslave* (1984). Like many friends who attended my predominantly white, relatively affluent, suburban high school during the George H.W. Bush administration, I am fond of Iron Maiden; but Jeff, a fellow alumnus, remains a fan as in *fanatic*.

Although his video includes a few brief, grainy shots of the band on stage, most of its running time documents Jeff’s reactions to the performance. Jeff, who has maintained an adolescent *joie de vivre* well into his thirties, makes this more exciting than you might expect. He plays air drums. He raises his hand in triumph as Iron Maiden launches into a favorite song. He bangs his head in the quintessential heavy metal gesture. Although he never smiles, he maintains an ecstatic gleam in his eyes that betokens an almost frightening level of commitment to the music.

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Mostly, Jeff is *loud*. He sings along with every word of every song at a volume that allows his camera's microphone to pick up his voice clearly even over the roar of Iron Maiden's amplification system. When singer Bruce Dickinson lets loose with one of his famous high-pitched screams, Jeff joins him, not always nailing the pitch exactly but making a respectable showing. His efforts culminate at what seems to be the concert's grand finale with three blood-curdling shrieks that no longer match anything Dickinson is doing but seem instead to express a state of blissful transport.

Jeff's screaming prowess has attracted favorable attention from his YouTube viewers; the first comment posted reads "Awesome video, you are an epic screamer :D up the Irons \m/." ² Within the video, however, there lurks a hint that not everyone shares this opinion. In a brief shot that appears to have been filmed after the concert in the parking lot, a fellow fan in sunglasses and concert T-shirt looks at the camera and says in a not entirely friendly voice, "Hey, but nothing against you man, you're doing your thing . . ." before stalking off. The preceding conversation is absent, but one speculates that the anonymous fan has just confronted Jeff about his concert-going etiquette, which, to be fair, was pretty unruly even by Iron Maiden standards.

Even though "I Saw Iron Maiden" may not reward critical scrutiny in quite the same way as, say, *Last Year at Marienbad*, it provides an excellent introduction to this essay's subject: the screaming audience. While screaming during popular music performances (at least loudly amplified ones) has become unremarkable and even expected, the mid-twentieth century witnessed a series of debates over the appropriateness and significance of screaming. These debates, fraught with moral judgment and often open panic, focused on issues central to American popular music: sexuality, race, class, and the rights and

responsibilities of the individual. When young women screamed, were they opening a safety valve to dispel unwholesome sexual energy, or was that energy dangerously heightened? Were white screamers learning a valuable lesson from the supposedly authentic, natural responses of black audiences, or were they undermining the values of restraint and composure upon which American – implicitly, European-American – civilization depended? Was screaming a democratic expression of individual freedom and excitement, or a symptom of irrational allegiance to a fascist mob? When we scream, are we just doing our thing? Or are we powerslaves?

My primary concern here is not with singing along, formal calls-and-responses initiated by performers, or hissing and booing at bad performances, although each of these practices overlaps at times with the kind of screaming that I am addressing. Rather, I am interested in screaming that expresses an audience's enthusiasm during professional musical performances but is not conventionally "musical" itself. ³ This practice first drew widespread attention during the swing era of the 1930s and 1940s and has never really gone away since. I borrow my title from Amiri Baraka's 1967 short story "The Screamers," in which wailing tenor saxophonist Lynn Hope (a real-life fixture of the 1950s R&B scene) leads his African American nightclub audience, "ecstatic, completed, involved in a secret communal expression," screaming into the streets of Newark, where they march joyously until police arrive to break up the celebration with "sticks and bil- lies." ⁴ Baraka's story highlights both the sense of power and release that audiences can find in screaming and the racial conflicts and fights for control of urban public space that often occur in response. As cultural critic Tricia Rose demonstrates, aggressive policing of black audiences continues into the hip hop era: "a hostile tenor,

if not actual verbal abuse, is a regular part of rap fan contact with arena security and police.”⁵ The screamers who have received the most press, however, typically have been young whites. In both cases, race and violence are never far from the surface of the critical discourse on screaming.

While screaming during musical performances did not become ubiquitous until the second half of the twentieth century, American audiences have been doing it for a long time, often in contexts including either African American performers or whites’ attempts to imitate them. Ronald Radano, an expert on the history of African American music, argues that Americans’ very notion of “black music” as a distinct category can be traced in part to the ecstatic singing and shouting at antebellum revival meetings in which whites as well as blacks participated.⁶ At the same time, in professional theaters, shouting of a more profane sort heralded the ersatz racial mimicry of blackface minstrels. Musicologist Dale Cockrell writes that the minstrel audience “felt fully in its right to respond spontaneously, forcefully, and vocally to events on stage.”⁷ Social historian Eric Lott points out that “the reported outrageousness of working-class spectators” formed the basis of a “whole genre of journalistic theater-crowd observation” of minstrel performances designed to titillate bourgeois readers.⁸ In short, minstrelsy’s audiences were themselves an important part of the show.

American audiences for European classical music did not act all that differently during this era. In his foundational study *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, historian Lawrence Levine cites a 1764 letter to the *New York Post-Boy* from a music-loving elitist upset that “instead of a modest and becoming silence nothing is heard during the whole performance, but laughing, talking very loud, squalling, overturning the benches,

etc. – behaviour more suited to a *broglio* than a musical entertainment.”⁹ While this account may depict rowdy socializing rather than screaming as such, by the nineteenth century, WASP critics regularly registered annoyance or bemusement with such disturbances as “delirious bravi from the Italian waiters who occupy the standing room behind the orchestra rail” or the “vociferous bellowings” of the “Teutonic” immigrants who attended Wagner’s operas.¹⁰ Diarist George Templeton Strong described an 1858 New York Philharmonic concert as “a square mile of tropical forest with its flocks of squalling paroquets and troops of chattering monkeys.”¹¹ As these references to immigrant ethnicities and primitive beasts suggest, urban elites saw it as their mission to civilize the supposedly less-evolved masses by constraining their wild behavior and promoting instead the moral uplift purportedly borne of quiet, private contemplation of sacralized masterworks. Cultural historian Daniel Cavicchi points out “an increasing association of the excessive behaviors of music loving with the divisive caricatures of class politics at midcentury.”¹²

By the century’s end, highbrow “arbiters of culture,” according to Levine, had largely won their campaign to “convert audiences into a collection of people reacting *individually* rather than collectively.”¹³ In 1871, Strong noted that “the vile habit of talking and giggling is much less general than heretofore,” and at around the same time, zealous conductor Theodore Thomas often interrupted pieces to chastise whispering couples and even cigar smokers who struck their matches too loudly.¹⁴ By the 1920s, renowned Philadelphia Orchestra conductor Leopold Stokowski seriously proposed banning applause itself, which he termed “a relic of the dark ages.”¹⁵ And such austerity was not unique to elite culture: Levine points out that vaudeville theaters also succeeded in squelching

raucous audiences. In 1898, impresario B. F. Keith recounted a performance at which he responded to “noisy demonstrations” from the gallery by walking on stage and announcing, in the voice of a gentle but firm parent chiding naughty children: “You can’t do that here.... I know that you mean no harm by it, and only do it from the goodness of your hearts, but others in the audience don’t like it, and it does not tend to improve the character of the entertainment, and I know you will agree with me that it is better to omit it hereafter.” He added, “As I walked off, I received a round of applause from the whole house including the gallery. And that was the last of the noise from the gallery gods.”¹⁶

The campaign to silence audiences did not succeed entirely. As social historian Richard Butsch argues, “[R]owdiness always survived on the margins.”¹⁷ Butsch cites a 1913 report on a “cheap vaudeville” theater by a Cleveland social reformer who complained that “the young men and boys stamped their feet, clapped their hands, many of them rising out of their seats, waving their hats, at the same time shouting vulgar suggestions to the performer.”¹⁸ Black audiences in movie theaters, which often featured jazz bands, also responded vocally to performers. In 1927, *Chicago Defender* columnist Dave Peyton “described the ‘freakish high-registered Breaks’ in a solo by Louis Armstrong as bringing movie ‘patrons to a howl’” and argued disapprovingly that “that class of music invites noise and frivolity.”¹⁹ As long as such behavior remained confined to predominantly black or working-class theaters, it attracted wider attention only as an exotic curiosity for white slummers or as a target for starchy moralists whose alarms went largely unheeded. The tone of the conversation changed, however, when the slummers’ children started screaming, too.

The excitement is palpable in the recording of swing idol Benny Goodman’s historic concert at Carnegie Hall on January 16, 1938.²⁰ As historian David Stowe reports, the Carnegie Hall audience “cheered, yelled, howled” at a break played by flamboyant drummer Gene Krupa; they “shouted, ‘Come on, drummer, go to town!’ and other encouragements.” Stowe, citing Levine, writes that “to hear the audience participation in the Carnegie concert, the spontaneous applause after solos, and the shouts of approbation from the ickies, is to recognize a performance dynamic very different from that required by high-culture codes and ensconced in American concert halls since the turn of the century.”²¹ Goodman failed to appreciate the most strident of these “encouragements” and complained later about “hoodlum jitterbugs, a ‘noisy minority’ who ‘blasted out the horns, yelled and stomped a dozen smooth passages of the trio into oblivion, wrecked a few numbers with trick ends completely.’”²² Rival bandleader Artie Shaw grumbled similarly about his own fans: “there seem[ed] to be hundreds and thousands of crazy people pushing and shoving and crowding and milling around in mobs, shrieking for your autograph, or your picture, or something, or just plain shrieking for no reason on earth you can figure out.”²³ In 1939, the music magazine *Metronome* complained that the jitterbug’s “disgusting habit of shouting to his swing idols is most annoying to the musicians and ruins the music.”²⁴ Swing’s performers and promoters found themselves in the awkward position of asking their most fervent supporters to settle down.

Although attacks on jitterbugs were often expressed in aesthetic terms, broader social anxieties underlay them. Of particular concern were the most widely noted screamers of the swing era: the “bobbysoxers” who worshipped Frank Sinatra.

By most accounts, “Sinatramania” began on December 30, 1942, at New York’s Paramount Theater, where the singer played a minor role in a show headlined by Goodman. “When Sinatra walked out on stage, the audience, filled with thirteen- to fifteen-year-old girls, broke into shouts, screams, and whatever vocal expressions of excitement could fill the theater. Benny Goodman was startled.”²⁵ At first, these expressions may not have been as spontaneous as they seemed: George Evans, Sinatra’s press agent, later defensively offered to donate \$5,000 to charity if anyone could prove that he had paid young women to “screech,” but admitted “mysteriously” that “certain things were done. . . . It would be as wrong for me to divulge them as it would be for a doctor to discuss his work.”²⁶ Whatever its origins, the craze soon took on a life of its own. Another member of Sinatra’s publicity team explained that “the dozen girls we hired to scream and swoon did exactly as we told them. But hundreds more we didn’t hire screamed even louder. It was wild, crazy, completely out of control.”²⁷ Historian and music-business insider Arnold Shaw remembered that “the scenes at the Paramount, and later at broadcasting studios, were the nearest thing to mass hypnosis the country had seen until then, with girls moaning ecstatically, shrieking uncontrollably, waving personal underthings at him, and just crying his name in sheer rapture.”²⁸ The phenomenon peaked on October 12, 1944, when a Times Square mob estimated at 30,000, hoping to gain entrance to a Sinatra performance, “smashed shop windows and destroyed the Paramount ticket booth; more than 400 police reserves, 200 detectives, and 20 squad cars could not prevent what would come to be known as “The Columbus Day Riot.”²⁹

Cultural critics struggled to explain to uncomprehending parents why their chil-

dren (and most troublingly, their daughters) were rioting over a scrawny singer with a genial, unassuming stage presence. Composer, novelist, and critic Paul Bowles wrote in the *New York Herald Tribune* that “it is a slightly disturbing spectacle to witness the almost synchronized screams that come from his audience as he closes his eyes or moves his body slightly sideways, because the spontaneous reaction corresponds to no common understanding relating to tradition or technique of performance, nor yet to the meaning of the sung text.”³⁰ Many commentators tried to reassure readers by invoking historical precedent to demonstrate that civilized society had survived this sort of thing before. In 1946, *New Yorker* critic E. J. Kahn, Jr., cited Franz Liszt, Johann Strauss, and Ignacy Paderewski as examples of eminently respectable musicians whose “feminine followers” had been prone to hysteria at the sight of their idols.³¹ In *The New Republic*, Bruce Bliven dug even deeper, arguing of the “phenomenon of mass hysteria” surrounding Sinatra that “you need to go back not merely to Lindbergh and Valentino and Admiral Dewey, to understand it, but to the dance madness that overtook some medieval German villages, or to the children’s crusade.”³² While such popular manias had no doubt been worrisome in their day, readers could imagine a future in which Sinatramania, too, would be a historical curiosity. Other reporters looked for sociological rather than historical explanations, blaming “wartime degeneracy” or the response of “children of the poor” to seeing a “kid from Hoboken who got the breaks.”³³

But such explanations only deferred the real issue: bobby-soxers who screamed for Sinatra appeared to exhibit sexual desire in a disturbing and public new way. Arnold Shaw recalled twenty years later that “there was a sense of shocked embarrassment, as if mother or father had

unintentionally come upon daughter in a moment of intimacy. The guardians of our heritage of Puritan restraint saw something unwholesome in the Sinatra hysteria.”³⁴ Tracing the etymology of *hysteria*, a word constantly employed to describe Sinatra’s admirers, leads us to the eighteenth-century belief that a supposed uterine pathology (the “wandering womb”) could cause women to manifest irrational, overwrought behavior.³⁵ By the beginning of the nineteenth century, European physicians “had succeeded in disassociating hysteria from actual female anatomy by linking it to the violent excesses experienced by the populace during the French Revolution, but the more subtle associations between hysteria and female sexuality would remain.”³⁶ In her study of the furor inspired by Lord Byron in early nineteenth-century Britain, literary scholar Ghislaine McDayter notes that “hysteria was thought to be aurally infectious.”³⁷ Bliven, in his analysis of Sinatramania, similarly depicted hysteria as an ear-borne pathology with his assertion that “trained nurses have to be on the premises in any theatre where [Sinatra] appears, to soothe the hysterical.”³⁸

Many critics attempted to explain Sinatramania with fashionable Freudian theory, which, as McDayter points out, emphasized “repressed desires and deferred pleasure” as the causes of hysteria.³⁹ Kahn wrote that “a great many psychologists, psychiatrists, psychopathologists, and other experts on the psyche have tried to define the relationship between Sinatra and young womanhood,” with conclusions ranging from “mass hypnotism” to “increased emotional sensitivity due to mammary hyperesthesia.”⁴⁰ Kahn himself preferred to blame “the desperate chemistry of adolescence,” while Bliven, even less precisely, believed that “just plain sex has a great deal to do with the matter.”⁴¹

One did not have to be a professional critic to espouse this view. Former bobby-soxer Martha Weinman Lear recalled in 1974 that boys loved to tease her and her friends: “In school they mocked us, collapsing into each others’ arms and shrieking in falsetto: ‘Oh-h-h, Frankie, I’m fainting I’m *fainting*.’ The hell with them.”⁴² While there were certainly male Sinatra fans, the dominant image of Sinatra’s audience involved hysterical women.⁴³

Some mental health experts understood Sinatramania more positively as a kind of therapy. Stowe quotes from a 1943 panel discussion sponsored by *Down Beat* magazine, in which one psychologist argued that the “extreme behavior” of the Sinatra fans “has its normal and healthy aspects, because it is a means of helping to solve *erotic* drives and of sublimating them.”⁴⁴ Many bobby-soxers probably would have agreed that their response was sexual while they sneered at the reassuring arguments about sublimation. Lear remembered that “the sociologists were out there in force in those mid-forties, speculating about the dynamics of mass hysteria, blathering on about how his yearning vulnerability appealed to our mother instincts. What yo-yo’s. Whatever he stirred beneath our barely budding breasts, it wasn’t motherly.”⁴⁵ Janice L. Booker, another former screamer for Sinatra, argues that “the screaming and moaning was a legitimate, socially acceptable catharsis for budding sexual longings, at a time when emotion was more internalized, when expressions of feeling were more constrained, when sexuality for young teenagers was not expressed as blatantly as it is now.”⁴⁶ Moreover, “participation in the bobby soxers phenomenon was a bonding experience for young women. Forty years later it might have been called ‘sisterhood.’”⁴⁷ This suggests that, in retrospect, Sinatramania might have repre-

sented not “mass self-debasement of women,” as jazz critic Gene Lees puts it, but rather a nascent feminist consciousness.⁴⁸

Some of the concern over screaming audiences during the swing era centered not on sexual freedom, but rather on a perceived link to fascism. Stowe cites frightened observers in 1938 who attacked swing as “musical Hitlerism” and depicted Benny Goodman’s fans calling for him “with the abandon of a crowd of Storm Troopers demanding their Fuehrer or a Roman parade greeting its Duce.”⁴⁹ Philosopher and sociologist Theodor Adorno, who had experienced the rise of Nazism firsthand in Germany before escaping into exile in the United States, pointed to the seemingly reflexive, irrational behavior of jitterbugs, as well as similarities between jazz and military music and such swing advertising slogans as “Follow Your Leader, Artie Shaw,” to argue that “jazz can easily be adapted for use by fascism.”⁵⁰

Adorno perceptively recognized that what he saw as the potentially fascist aspects of jitterbugs’ behavior were inspired by primitivist stereotypes of African American culture. Adorno himself was willing to entertain the racist idea that African Americans were naturally predisposed to “primitive” behavior; “how far the aboriginal Harlem jitterbug is the legitimate heir to primitive religious ecstasy and to what extent he is a commercial artefact,” he wrote in 1941, “is a question for the anthropologist.”⁵¹ As the latter possibility suggests, however, Adorno was deeply skeptical that a form of mass culture such as swing could somehow escape the all-encompassing control of the capitalist culture industry. He argued that if “a visitor to a Harlem jazz palace is struck by the changes from frenzy to apathy in the behavior of expert negro listeners . . . this behavior has more to do with the modern

factory than with the extreme moods of primitives.”⁵² White jitterbugs, then, were doubly inauthentic, as they badly imitated the allegedly primitive behavior of African American swing fans who were in fact far from primitive. “The aping by jitterbugs of negro strawmen is an apology for relieving boredom by pseudo-primitivism. The jitterbug’s primitivity resides in his modernity.”⁵³ For Adorno, the antics of jitterbugs constituted not a blow for personal freedom but rather a “pseudoactivity,” a practice that tricked young people who amounted to “mere centers of socially conditioned reflexes” into thinking that they were expressing individual agency.⁵⁴ While Adorno’s consistent use of the male pronoun in making his argument was typical of this period, it also highlights the reductive gender categories employed in most criticism of screaming audiences: female screamers were linked primarily to sexual impropriety, male screamers were more often depicted as a potentially violent mob.

The notion of a link among screaming men, black music, and a mob mentality persisted in the rhythm & blues and small-group jazz scenes of the postwar era. A frequent source of controversy was the ethnically mixed audience at Jazz at the Philharmonic (JATP) concerts, which were founded in Los Angeles in 1944 and frequently toured the United States and eventually the world through the 1950s. “The mainstay populations of his audience, according to JATP impresario Norman Granz, were large numbers of Italian Americans, blacks, and Jews, mostly in their teens and twenties. ‘I mean, these were people who got very emotional about their music and the musicians I had,’ Granz said.”⁵⁵ Critic Whitney Balliett claimed that while JATP audiences looked like the “spiritual offspring” of jitterbugs, they were actually “more warlike. They rarely move from their seats, yet they man-

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age to give off through a series of screams (the word 'go' repeated like the successive slams of the cars on a fast freight), blood-stopping whistles, and stamping feet a mass intensity that would have soothed Hitler, and made Benny Goodman pale."⁵⁶ Tad Hershorn, in his recent biography of Granz, defends the promoter from such charges, pointing out that the "issues raised about the alleged excesses of JATP's audiences were hardly novel" and comparing them to the nineteenth-century opera audiences discussed by Levine.⁵⁷ Hershorn argues that "Granz had democratized access to the concert hall and the prestige it afforded, with implications for jazz as a listening experience. JATP triumphed as entertainment in part because it encouraged the lively bond between artist and audience that was central to the creation of the music."⁵⁸

Nonetheless, Granz sometimes found himself obligated to chastise his audience much like B. F. Keith had a half-century earlier. He remembered:

I insisted that audiences respect the musicians, because in the early days some of the houses we played were not to be believed. . . . If anyone made noise, I stopped the show. I even passed out little handbills ("How to Act at a Jazz Concert"). Now it didn't make me well liked by the public, but I think the public that did want to hear the artist, and didn't want to hear noisy exhibitionists, liked it too.⁵⁹

Granz's policies were perhaps necessary if he was to continue staging concerts at all: Hershorn writes that "for theaters that did not publicly admit to racial or ethnic discrimination, disruptive episodes presented convenient rationales for banning JATP."⁶⁰

By the 1950s, the figure of the screaming fan had become a convention, a set of predictable gestures and responses that

audiences and their critics continued to deploy even as musical genres and social contexts changed. The gender lines established during the swing era persisted. We can trace panic over female sexuality through the succeeding history of the discourse on Anglo-American popular music, from Elvis Presley's devotees (satirized in the 1963 film *Bye Bye Birdie*) to Beatlemania (satirized in their British incarnation in the 1964 film *A Hard Day's Night*) to Ken Russell's 1975 film *Lisztomania*, which recasts Franz Liszt (played by the Who's Roger Daltrey) as a glam rock star besieged by shrieking women. In a giddily lurid satire (or perhaps an unironic warning?) of the simultaneous thrill and threat that female screamers represented, Liszt/Daltrey dreams that his ardent groupies' attention gives him a cartoonishly huge erection (much larger than the rest of his body) around which the women do a maypole dance before they chop it off with a guillotine. (YouTube it if you must.) Today, noted screamers include "Beliebers," admirers of Canadian teen heartthrob Justin Bieber. A YouTube search for the phrase "beliebers screaming" currently yields 483 hits. A recent report on Bieber in the *London Evening Standard* strikes a predictable tone of condescending concern over hysterical sexuality run amok:

As two silver people carriers pulled away, the 100 or so shrieking pubescent girls who had been trailing the teenage Canadian pop sensation all day gave chase. They swarmed across four lanes of traffic, not really caring that it was cold, rainy and the No. 9 bus was about to run them over. . . . "I could just die! I could just die!" panted one, fondling the blacked-out windows.

One Belieber stops the reporter to pass along a message to the star: "'Justin Bieber! I am legal! I'm 16 now!' said one of them into my Dictaphone, hoping I would relay this. Surely Justin doesn't go in for that

kind of thing? Doesn't he wear a chastity ring?"⁶¹

Conversations about male screamers, by contrast, have remained focused on race and violence, portraying what Richard Butsch calls "a bad audience, a crowd rather than a public."⁶² Take, for example, the white drifters in Jack Kerouac's 1959 best seller *On the Road*, who cut loose at nightclubs populated by stereotypical black "strawmen" like those described by Adorno. Iconic hipster Dean Moriarty starts yelling ("Blow, man, blow!") before he even gets inside the club, and joins a group of black screamers inside: "'Stay with it, man!' roared a man with a foghorn voice, and let out a big groan that must have been heard clear out in Sacramento, ah-haa! 'Whoo!' said Dean. He was rubbing his chest, his belly; the sweat splashed from his face."⁶³ Then leap forward a half-century to the Gathering of the Juggalos, an annual festival for fans of white rap duo Insane Clown Posse (whose "clown" makeup bears more than a slight resemblance to blackface): "During concerts, instead of clapping or cheering, Juggalos hoot en masse: 'Whooooooooooooo whooooo!' It sounds like a flock of horned owls." Juggalos take their whooping seriously. "In 2010, when old-school legend Method Man kept shouting out, 'Illinois' at the Gathering as if the crowd's loyalty was geographic, and seemed confused by their repeated 'Whoop! Whoop!', someone in the crowd beaned him in the face, almost knocked him out, drawing blood."⁶⁴ While there are "Juggalettes," accounts of the Juggalo subculture typically emphasize its male membership and what one writer calls "the blatant misogyny condoned in the Juggalo community."⁶⁵ Whether one celebrates (like Kerouac) or denigrates (like most reports on Juggalos) male screamers, they retain a perceived, if sometimes deserved, reputation for thuggery, sexism, and racial stereotyping.

In 2013, does screaming retain any potential for social disruption? Much critical commentary on screaming audiences, rather than question the sexism, racism, classism, and heteronormativity that underlies American popular culture, seems simply to perpetuate these values through the constant repetition of clichés. The mutual influence between the practice of and the discourse on screaming has led to a certain ossification, with critics imputing female hysteria and male aggression to audiences who dutifully enact the outrages expected of them. If one looks more closely, however, it is not hard to find cracks in the conventional narrative. There are "Boy Beliebers," for example, although Wikipedia downplays their significance by reassuring us that they "are generally loved by their female counterparts due to their rarity," which suggests that they are both mercifully few and implicitly straight.⁶⁶ Juggalos, while they may exhibit deplorable sexism, have a more complex relationship to questions of race and class. Violent J of Insane Clown Posse has claimed that "you can't be a racist Juggalo. It sort of defeats the whole thing. If you call yourself a Juggalo and you have a racial prejudice, it's just not making sense to me."⁶⁷ Sympathizers point out that many critics' "hatred" of the Juggalos "is at least partially class-based: Juggalos tend to be poor and uneducated, from economically depressed small towns and broken homes." From this point of view, the group's "constant chants of 'Family! Family!'" might have as much to do with working-class solidarity as with patriarchal masculinity or what music critic Nathan Rabin calls "indulging an inner child focused on its most transgressive needs."⁶⁸ Screamers are often inane or offensive, but that is rarely the only story that can be told about them.

Screaming maintains its subversive power because it effectively dramatizes

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the tension among social expectations, group solidarity, and individual freedom. When we scream, we engage in an activity that is both personal and collective: we announce our own presence in a unique way even as everyone around us does roughly the same thing. Screamers are, in one sense, participating in a deeply democratic endeavor, with every voice given equal weight, but the resulting roar often fails to articulate any shared message other than its own loudness. Screamers engage at a visceral level with the question of what it means to maintain one's own identity within mass society, a question that doesn't presume a single answer. Moreover, the long and well-known tradition of the screaming audience forces today's screamers to view themselves in a historical context, even as they promise themselves that they will never fade out or quiet down as

their predecessors inevitably did. In her study of "Byromania," Ghislaine McDayter writes that the "fan-as-hysteric . . . revealed the contradictions at the heart of some of our most cherished cultural myths: the 'rational' nature of democracy and the fantasy of stable subjectivity."⁶⁹

By giving such contradictions sonic form, screamers do not resolve them, but at the very least they often provide an opportunity to consider new possibilities. The boy Belieber and the class-conscious Juggalo might be raising such possibilities when they scream, or they may simply be re-tracing and sharpening the lines around fixed identities. Whatever our conclusion, we need to listen to screamers, at least as much as we listen to musicians, when we make judgments about American popular music's power and significance.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ "I Saw Iron Maiden," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYSM_2yqXjc (accessed September 28, 2012).
- ² "\m/" depicts the "devil horns" hand gesture associated with heavy metal.
- ³ Note that I am addressing only music audiences; screaming at sports events or political rallies is beyond my scope here, although these practices are undoubtedly related to those I will discuss.
- ⁴ Amiri Baraka, "The Screamers" (1967), in *Hot and Cool: Jazz Short Stories*, ed. Marcela Breton (New York: Plume, 1990), 267.
- ⁵ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 127.
- ⁶ Ronald Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 115–139.
- ⁷ Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 58.
- ⁸ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 157.
- ⁹ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 179.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 86, 103.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 181.

- ¹² Daniel Cavicchi, "Loving Music: Listeners, Entertainments, and the Origins of Music Fandom in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 245.
- ¹³ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 184, 195.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 196.
- ¹⁷ Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750 – 1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 120.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.
- ¹⁹ Mary Carbine, "'The Finest Outside the Loop': Motion Picture Exhibition in Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1905 – 1928," *Camera Obscura* 23 (May 1990): 29.
- ²⁰ Benny Goodman, *Live at Carnegie Hall*, recorded January 16, 1938 (Columbia CD G2K 40244).
- ²¹ David W. Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big-Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 22. "Ickies" was a derogatory slang term for "exuberant swing fad-dists"; see Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 18, 34 – 35.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 18 – 19.
- ²³ Vladimir Simosko, *Artie Shaw: A Musical Biography and Discography* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow, 2000), 80.
- ²⁴ Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 34.
- ²⁵ Janice L. Booker, "Why the Bobby Soxers?" in *Frank Sinatra: History, Identity, and Italian American Culture*, ed. Stanislao G. Pugliese (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 78 – 79.
- ²⁶ E. J. Kahn, Jr., "Phenomenon: II – The Fave, the Fans, and the Fiends," *The New Yorker*, November 2, 1946, 42, 44.
- ²⁷ Booker, "Why the Bobby Soxers?" 78.
- ²⁸ Arnold Shaw, *Sinatra: Twentieth-Century Romantic* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 42.
- ²⁹ Booker, "Why the Bobby Soxers?" 79; James F. Smith, "Bobby Sox and Blue Suede Shoes: Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley as Teen Idols," in *Frank Sinatra and Popular Culture: Essays on an American Icon*, ed. Leonard Mustazza (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998), 62.
- ³⁰ Shaw, *Sinatra*, 48 – 49.
- ³¹ Kahn, "Phenomenon," 37.
- ³² Bruce Bliven, "The Voice and the Kids" (1944), in *The Frank Sinatra Reader*, ed. Steven Petkov and Leonard Mustazza (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 30.
- ³³ Shaw, *Sinatra*, 49; Bliven, "The Voice and the Kids," 33.
- ³⁴ Shaw, *Sinatra*, 50.
- ³⁵ Ghislaine McDayter, *Byromania and the Birth of Celebrity Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 47.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.
- ³⁸ Bliven, "The Voice and the Kids," 31.
- ³⁹ McDayter, *Byromania*, 61.
- ⁴⁰ Kahn, "Phenomenon," 37.

- The* 41 Ibid.; Bliven, “The Voice and the Kids,” 33.
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- 42 Martha Weinman Lear, “The Bobby Sox Have Wilted, but the Memory Remains Fresh,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 1974.
- 43 See, for example, Derek Jewell, “From *Frank Sinatra: A Celebration*,” in *The Frank Sinatra Reader*, ed. Petkov and Mustazza, 53 – 55.
- 44 Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 147.
- 45 Lear, “The Bobby Sox Have Wilted.”
- 46 Booker, “Why the Bobby Soxers?” 75.
- 47 Ibid., 76.
- 48 Gene Lees, *Singers and the Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 102 – 103. Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs make a similar argument about the Beatlemania of the 1960s, which they regard as “the first mass outburst of the sixties to feature women – in this case girls, who would not reach full adulthood until the seventies and the emergence of a genuinely political movement for women’s liberation.” See Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs, “Beatlemania: Girls Just Want to Have Fun,” in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 85. For a related argument about Elvis fans, see Sue Wise, “Sexing Elvis,” in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (London: Routledge, 1990), 390 – 398.
- 49 Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 24.
- 50 Theodor W. Adorno, “On Popular Music” (1941), in Adorno, *Current of Music: Elements of a Radio Theory*, ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 324; Theodor W. Adorno, “On Jazz” (1936), in Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 485.
- 51 Adorno, “On Popular Music,” 325.
- 52 Ibid., 311.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 Theodor W. Adorno, “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening” (1938), in *Essays on Music*, ed. Leppert, 308; Adorno, “On Popular Music,” 323.
- 55 Tad Hershorn, *Norman Granz: The Man Who Used Jazz for Justice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 118 – 119.
- 56 Whitney Balliett, *The Sound of Surprise: 46 Pieces on Jazz* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1959), 8.
- 57 Hershorn, *Norman Granz*, 117.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Ibid., 119.
- 60 Ibid., 118.
- 61 Richard Godwin, “One Night with Justin Bieber and I’m a Belieber,” *London Evening Standard*, April 24, 2012.
- 62 Richard Butsch, *The Citizen Audience: Crowds, Publics, and Individuals* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 141.
- 63 Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (1957; New York: Penguin, 1976), 196 – 197.
- 64 Camille Doderer, “Live from Insane Clown Posse’s Gathering of the Juggalos,” *Village Voice*, September 8, 2010.
- 65 Katie Waldeck, “B-Sides: Tila Tequila Vs. the World,” August 19, 2010, <http://bitchmagazine.org/post/b-sides-tila-tequila-versus-the-world> (accessed September 30, 2012).

⁶⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belieber> (accessed September 30, 2012).

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⁶⁷ Camille Doderio, "Insane Clown Posse Talk Juggalo Magic, Justin Bieber, Trekkies, and Being Rich," *Village Voice*, September 4, 2010, http://blogs.villagevoice.com/music/2010/09/insane_clown_posse_rich.php (accessed October 3, 2012).

⁶⁸ Nathan Rabin, "Strange Times at the 2012 Gathering of the Juggalos," *AV Club*, August 14, 2012, http://www.avclub.com/articles/strange-times-at-the-2012-gathering-of-the-juggalo_83814/ (accessed October 3, 2012).

⁶⁹ McDayter, *Byromania*, 26.

Yellow Skin, White Masks

Mina Yang

Abstract: Ethnic studies scholars have long bemoaned the near absence of Asians on the big and small screens and popular music charts in the United States, rendering them as outsiders vis-à-vis the American public sphere. In the last few years, however, Asians have sprung up on shows like “Glee” and “America’s Best Dance Crew” in disproportionately large numbers, challenging entrenched stereotypes and creating new audiovisual associations with Asianness. This essay considers how emerging Asian American hip-hop dancers and musicians negotiate their self-representation in different contexts and what their strategies reveal about the postmillennial Asian youth’s relationship to American and transpacific culture and the outer limits of American music.

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Music, as purveyed by the MGM Grand Hollywood Theater and Monte Carlo Resort & Casino in the heart of Las Vegas – the entertainment mecca of the United States – is supposedly the very inspiration for life itself. Featuring JabbaWockeeZ, the winning hip-hop group from the first season of the televised dance competition *America’s Best Dance Crew* (ABDC), *MŪ.S.I.C.* (read both as “music” and as “muse I see”) is comprised of fanciful episodes from a life lived creatively. The show featured synchronized dancing, comic miming, athletic feats, extravagant lighting effects, and glittery costumes, held together by a thumping soundtrack made up of familiar tunes, old and new. The JabbaWockeeZ members, who specialize in popping and b-boying, brought dance front and center in this musical experience, citing classic dance moments from the history of American popular music, from Gene Kelly’s elegant footwork in *Singin’ in the Rain*, to James Brown’s struts and Michael Jackson’s moonwalk, to the more recent hip gyrations of Beyoncé’s “Single Girls” and the “Party Rock” shuffle courtesy of LMFAO.

From the beginning to the end of the show, one element remained constant: the blank white masks that the dancers wore and that have become JabbaWockeeZ’s signature look. Used as props and as part

of the stage set, the masks signify mystery in one moment and represent the everyman in the next. In addition to the masks, the dancers' costumes cloaked every inch of their bodies, covering hair, skin, hands, and any other features that would distinguish one dancer from another (see Figure 1). Unless one had some acquaintance with JabbaWockeeZ from before the show, it would have been nearly impossible to know that this crew, embodying and celebrating the history of American popular music in this hyper-commercial venue, is in fact made up predominantly of Asian American men.

Masks are deployed in contemporary performances for an array of reasons. They could represent a throwback to older dramatic traditions like the Japanese Noh and ancient Greek pantomime or could refer to rituals from masquerade ceremonies that take place in various parts of the world. In the case of JabbaWockeeZ, however, the fact that the masks have something to do with race is confirmed by the dancers' own explanations. For example, one article about the popular dance group reported that "Jabbawockeez includes dancers of various ethnic backgrounds, including Vietnamese, Filipino, Korean, and African-American. 'But that's the beauty of the mask,' [group member] Nguyen says. 'When we put it on, it's not about who we are or where we came from. We're all one.'" In another interview, JabbaWockeeZ dancer Eddie Gutierrez put it even more bluntly: "The idea of the mask is to remove all ethnic and social barriers when we perform."¹

What does it mean to "remove all ethnic and social barriers" through masking? Does the removal of these barriers achieve for the group a state of racelessness, which in the U.S. sociopolitical context is equivalent to whiteness, making the JabbaWockeeZ mask a Fanonian "white mask" that hides from view the t(a)int of color?²

Or rather, is this another means of facilitating neo-minstrelsy, of allowing a more privileged group to appropriate black music and dance in an act of "love and theft," a misguided attempt to tap into the hipness long associated with African American culture without having to be directly accountable for crimes committed?³ The late political scientist Michael Rogin, in his study of Jewish entertainers, suggested yet another model to explain the appeal of minstrelsy's racial cross-dressing, and it might also apply to JabbaWockeeZ: that through their participation in blackface minstrelsy, a racialized culture of black and white working-class Americans, immigrant Jews (or Asians, in this case) could emerge as full-fledged Americans.⁴

As significant as these contributions have been to understanding American race relations, they do not go beyond the paradigmatic binary racial scheme of black and white, and thus their concepts of racial passing/crossing/co-opting/emulating fall short of adequately explaining the dynamics at work for these Asian American b-boys. To better grasp the multiracial and polycultural complexities of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, other cultural theorists situate the United States within larger global forces, keeping in view the fluid interplay of economic, social, and cultural flows across racial and national boundaries. For example, sociologist George Lipsitz, following literary scholar Gayatri Spivak, sees in the cultural exchanges between communities of color a mode of "strategic anti-essentialism," whereby youths of one group temporarily assume the cultural practices of another group in order to express aspects of themselves that would otherwise not be comprehended or acknowledged by the mainstream. By practicing black dance, Asian American artists highlight the "families of resemblance" that unite minority communities in the United States,



From JabbaWockeeZ, “Devastating Stereo” music video, JBKWZ Records (2011).

even as mainstream institutions continue to promulgate policies of “divide and rule.”⁵

The last decade has seen the publication of several scholarly volumes devoted to the complexities of Afro-Asian relations. In one of the most recent of these, *Afro-Asian Encounters*, writers who have contributed significantly to this scholarship – Vijay Prashad, Gary Okihiro, and Fred Ho, among others – remind readers of the historic connections between the formerly colonized peoples of Asia and Africa and the cultural overlaps shared by Asian and African Americans in areas like martial arts and music, even while they recount past incidents of racial tensions between the two minority groups. Shining a spotlight on hip-hop in particular, Oliver Wang and Deborah Elizabeth Whaley caution against romanticizing the relationship between the two groups: against the

backdrop of persistent structural racism in the United States, some African Americans have expressed their resentment of Asian Americans “stealing” their musical culture, and black rappers are just as guilty of circulating and perpetuating Orientalist ideas and images as are those in positions of power.⁶ In a book-length study of South Asian Americans in hip-hop, Nitasha Tamar Sharma argues that her subjects are more likely than not to be knowledgeable about the historical allegiances between colonized peoples and to identify personally with the counter-hegemonic rhetoric of politically conscious rappers, especially as South Asian Americans have come under intensified racial scrutiny in the post-9/11 political climate.⁷

There are perhaps elements of all these arguments, especially at the level of the individual actors, but as a whole, JabbaWockeeZ’s *MÜS.I.C.* emblemizes what

Karen Shimakawa has identified as the liminal positionality of Asian Americans “between the poles of abject visibility/stereotype/foreigner and invisibility/assimilation (to whiteness).”⁸ Behind the white masks, the members of JabbaWockeeZ dance within the constraints imposed upon Asian American artists generally, between the poles of whiteness and blackness, presence and lack, visibility and invisibility, subject and object. As part of the fastest growing racial group in the United States, which is nonetheless nearly invisible in mainstream popular culture, JabbaWockeeZ and the other Asian American hip-hop artists analyzed in this essay must negotiate “a process of *abjection*, an attempt to circumscribe and radically differentiate something that, although deemed repulsively *other* is, paradoxically, at some fundamental level, an undifferentiable part of the whole.”⁹ Through their masked performances, they mark the outer limits of American music.

JabbaWockeeZ is not the only Asian American act to achieve mainstream stardom as dancers. In the first six (of seven total, from 2008 to 2012) seasons of *ABDC*, telecast on MTV, every winning group had several, if not all, Asian members, and another popular televised dance competition, *So You Think You Can Dance* (on Fox since 2005), has also spotlighted a disproportionately high number of Asian American dancers. The prominence of JabbaWockeeZ and a host of other Asian Americans in hip-hop dance may be surprising to those who have, in the past, followed the frustratingly stunted careers of Asian MCs like the Chinese American rapper Jin and rap trio Mountain Brothers, and who have noted the tenacity of anti-Asian stereotypes as borne out by William Hung’s fifteen minutes of pop music infamy. As music critics Rachel Devitt, Oliver Wang, and Deborah Wong have pointed out,

Asian Americans have participated in the larger hip-hop culture from its early days, yet their contributions often go unrecognized, especially in rap, which is by far the most lucrative and visible element of hip-hop.¹⁰

Representing a smaller subculture of aficionados who prize skill over commercial viability, Asian deejays like the Filipino American DJ Qbert, Mix Master Mike, and DJ Apollo have dominated international championships and inspired a younger generation of turntablists, but their achievements are for the most part ignored by mainstream pop culture.¹¹ Asian American b-boying, which has received little scholarly attention, especially when compared to rapping or deejaying, has had an even greater impact on Asian America, as makeshift basement and community dance studios and university dance organizations have, in the last twenty years, become hotbeds of Asian American creative expression. The dance crew Kaba Modern, for instance, which placed third in the first season of *ABDC*, grew out of the Filipino student association at University of California, Irvine, and now includes an under-18 subgroup for neighborhood kids. Irvine is also home to the Vibe Dance Competition, one of the largest of its kind on the West Coast, started in 1996 by UC Irvine’s Asian-interest fraternity, Lambda Theta Delta.¹² Such university-level competitions and grassroots-organized community events, like the Korean American Kollaboration talent shows that have occurred annually since 2000 in large cities across the United States, provide Asian American dancers with venues in which to showcase their skills and help them build a supportive audience base, which is key to the success of the crews that compete on *ABDC*. In articles and editorials in ethnic periodicals, such as *Asianweek*, *Hyphen*, *Filipino Express*, *Northwest Asian Weekly*, *International Examiner*, and *Asian*

Reporter, fans have been busily pointing out and expressing jubilation at the rising prominence of Asians and Asian Americans in dance shows.

Why, then, would the JabbaWockeeZ dancers want to cover their skin in its entirety and deny their Asian American fans the opportunity to identify physically with their idols? In addition to the fraught triangulated movement between black, white, and Asian as discussed above, Asian American b-boys must contend with the formidable challenge of performing in front of audiences who come with certain expectations that have been shaped by pernicious stereotypes of Asian (non)manhood. (I should note that the audience for *MÜS.I.C.* when I attended the show was very diverse in terms of race, age, and gender.) Subjected to lynching and other physical violence in the nineteenth century, rounded up like cattle and placed in internment camps during World War II, once made to portray villainous rapists and, more recently, impotent, asexual hyper-nerds in popular culture, the Asian American male body has survived more than its share of ignominy.¹³ The latest incarnation of the nerd, in particular, who is all brain and no body (or at least no sexuality), is especially problematic for those involved in a dance genre that is based on overt displays of masculine swagger and power, and on a value system derived from the streets of corporeal risk-taking, competitiveness, and improvisation.

Further, for any male dancer, the gaze of the public – which associates dance with effeminacy – can be discomfiting; for a male dancer of color, such a gaze is even more potentially troublesome. In *The Male Dancer*, dance historian Ramsay Burt writes of Bill T. Jones, the celebrated black director-choreographer: “as a black man on stage being watched primarily by white spectators he felt that his state in the world was that of being ‘such a mar-

ginal, “special black.”” He felt that he was a ‘commodity’ and that this ‘must be a feeling that women have.’”¹⁴ An Asian male dancer must not only adapt to such an objectifying gaze, but also fight off the specters of *American Idol*’s William Hung, the Long Duk Dong character in *Sixteen Candles*, Mr. Yuneyoshi from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, and all the other popular images of Asian malehood that largely define Asian American men for the mainstream American public. These anxieties come to surface during a few key moments in JabbaWockeeZ’s *MÜS.I.C.*: at one point, the narrator on the soundtrack addresses one of the dancers and admonishes him that real men don’t dance, to which the crew launches into a parody of Beyoncé’s “Single Ladies” dance with exaggerated hip and wrist movements played for laughs; later, the group woos a woman from the audience and one of the dancers runs off with her and returns jubilantly following an implied sexual conquest. Even as the masks hide their problematized Asianness from view, these Asian American b-boys are nevertheless preoccupied with the representation of their masculinity and seem compelled to overcompensate in their efforts to establish their heteronormative maleness.

Such negotiations within the liminal space of Asian American hip-hop dance and music are also borne out in the work of Harry Shum, Jr., whose most famous dance performances have likewise involved the erasure of his individuality. As one of the silhouetted dancers in the popular series of iPod commercials, Shum sported a mohawk for one ad and cornrows for another, hairstyles associated with specific racial profiles not his own (see Figure 2). Just as certain vocal and musical styles are thought to be coded black or white in the popular imagination, dance styles have accrued specific racial associations; and the Asian body does not assume whiteness or



From the iPod commercial “Hey Mama” (2005).

blackness in dance without some friction. However, when the individual (racially marked) characteristics of the body are obscured via silhouetting, as for Shum, or through the use of masks, as for Jabba-WockeeZ, the viewer can enjoy the spectacle of virtuosic dancing bodies without the “distraction” of racial incompatibility. Shum acknowledged such a point, commenting on the iPod audition process: “[I was happy to have this job] just for the fact that I was chosen for my dancing and just my dancing alone. It was a silhouette of me so looks and race didn’t play into it unlike most of the jobs I would audition for.”¹⁵

Shum’s role as Mike Chang on the hit television series *Glee* further brings the tensions between race and dance into relief. During the first season, Shum remained in the background as a dancer, and his character did not have a voice (metaphorically and literally, as in singing and speaking

lines). By the second season, Chang began to be incorporated into the story lines when he and Tina Cohen-Chang (Jenna Ushkowitz), the only other Asian character in the cast, became involved in a romantic relationship. But Chang did not truly gain dramatic substance or earn his first singing solo until an episode titled “Asian F” (Season 3, 2011), in which he rebels against his father by choosing to dedicate himself to glee club and dance rather than focus exclusively on academic achievement. It is only by disavowing his “Asian” obligations to his father, a stereotypical Asian tiger parent, and abandoning the model minority path to success via Harvard to instead pursue his own dream of becoming a dancer that Chang is able, at last, to transcend the stigma of Asianness (invisibility, silence) and become a legitimate artist in the world of *Glee*.

A final example from Shum’s portfolio: directed by Jon Chu, the popular Holly-

wood dance films *Step Up 2: The Streets* and *Step Up 3D* spotlight the stories of white protagonists whose personal lives are messily intertwined with the outcome of big dance battles. African American and Latino supporting casts add the requisite touch of authenticity; Asian dancers, including Shum and JabbaWockeeZ's Reynan Shawn Paguio, are more ornamental than essential (and one wonders if they would have been used at all if the director himself were not an Asian American dancer).¹⁶ In all of these examples, Asian dancers occupy a liminal space: there but not there, seen but not seen.

The interactions between dancing bodies and music tell us even more about the boundaries around American popular music that Asian American artists delineate through their abject position. The first decade of the twenty-first century marked important milestones for Asian American musicians, including the public failure of William Hung, who became a celebrity after his humiliatingly tone- and rhythm-deaf audition on *American Idol*, and of MC Jin, the first Asian rapper to sign with a major label, who was featured in high-visibility media outlets before the release (and subsequent flop) of his first album, and their redemption, via the phenomenal success of the Far East Movement (a.k.a. FM), the first Asian American group ever to score a number one hit on the *Billboard* charts with the single "Like a G6" (2010). Together, these performers stand for the two sides of Asian American abjection: Hung, who conforms all too painfully to the fresh-off-the-boat Asian nerd stereotype, and Jin, who chose to foreground his Chinese heritage with preemptive strikes against his race-baiting opponents in his rhymes (particularly in his first single, "Speak Chinese" from *The Rest Is History*) and in interviews, represent that which is irredeemably foreign and repulsively other;

on the other hand, FM, which purveys an electronic-cool brand of dance music, a kind of hip-hop with race stripped away, exemplifies the invisible, "assimilated into white" end of the spectrum.

Of course it is a bit more complicated than that, and a closer look at FM in particular demonstrates just the sort of tensions Asian American artists must negotiate between different audience expectations of cultural legitimacy and commercial viability. A quartet of Japanese/Chinese-, Korean-, and Filipino-Angelino musicians, FM began its ascent to stardom by performing on the Asian American circuit of local talent shows and concerts, getting its big break when its song "Round Round" was featured on Justin Lin's film *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (2006).¹⁷ FM has pursued distribution deals in Asia as well as in the West and continues to collaborate with notable Asian and Asian American filmmakers and dancers. Yet its music and self-representation largely "erase" its Asianness. Members of FM sport dark sunglasses (see Figure 3) in most of their appearances, obscuring their eyes, the most ethnically marked features on an Asian face (think slanty eyes, almond eyes, chink eyes, and so on; the eyes are also the most surgically altered features of Asian women since Westernization). Musically and lyrically, FM eschews any overt reference to Asianness, forgoing the pointed political barbs and/or Asian-sounding instrumentation of Jin and other earlier Asian American hip-hop artists for more universalized techno-infused party music.

In a musical genre that banks much of its legitimacy on specific cultural (read: black) roots (in actuality, narrowly constructed notions of blackness), Asian Americans have not fared well in the past, having to contend with the stereotype of the perennially foreign model minority that runs against the grain of hip-hop dis-



From Far East Movement, “Like a G6” music video (2010).

courses around street cred and authenticity, an often insurmountable challenge that Oliver Wang calls the “authenticity crisis” of Asian American rappers.¹⁸ FM simply bypassed such stereotyping and achieved mainstream popularity, it seems, by hiding from view any overt signifiers of Asian-ness. FM’s Prohgress and Kev Nish went so far as to express their cognizance of the commonality in FM’s and JabbaWockeeZ’s ways of packaging themselves, noting that, “We had a ‘Jabbawockeez’ type of mentality, where we didn’t want people to judge our music by our race or face, so we [originally] started with the name ‘Emcee’s Anonymous.’”¹⁹ Nish later conceded that trying to hide the group’s ethnic makeup was futile: “Emcee’s Anonymous is wack – that’s about being scared to own up to who you are. We respect and take pride in our culture.”²⁰ In these equivocating opinions, as well as in the following examples from their body of work, the members of FM reveal their ambivalence about their self-representation as Asian.

Before the mainstream success of “Like a G6,” FM was more visibly ensconced in the environs of Asian America, as can be seen in the video for “Dance Like Michael Jackson” (2008).²¹ A collaboration of Wong Fu Productions, a trio of Asian American filmmakers who started making short films while students at the University of California, San Diego²²; the third-season winners of *ABDC*, the all-Asian Quest Crew; and FM, the video conveys a new Asian American hipness that, through the celebration of Michael Jackson’s artistry, pays tribute to African American music and dance all the while showing Asian Americans to be capable of the physical mastery and sensual pleasures captured in the king of pop’s seminal videos. The FM video opens with an Asian guy clumsily trying to replicate Jackson’s famous dance moves from the 1982 “Beat It” video. He plays the role of the stereotypical Asian male, dorky and comically unnatural in his attempts to mimic Jackson’s sexually suggestive crotch

grabs and hip thrusts. Quest Crew dancers enter the scene, and their gracefully executed sequence that remixes and reinterprets Jackson's signature moves provides a welcome foil to the fumbling missteps of the wannabe dancer who falls on his face and exits the video before the music begins.

Quest Crew continues to run through the opening sequence, adding more and more dancers, while FM sings the lyrics, also a remix of Jackson's song titles and lines:

Yeah, feel the beat in your stomach
Put on a glove and love it
Feel the bass, intro out of space
Moonwalk all over your face
I'm priceless, my identity crisis
You dance, I dance to white disc
I got the moves to thrill ya, looks to kill ya,
straight up like tequila
Go gorilla, this no monkey business
This hip hop no quantum physics
Good Vibe, Bad though, Mixarto,
Blend it like a Mulatto
Spin around kick like taekwondo
You gotta work those shoes right to the soles
Boogie on down,
Billie Jean style
Say "Ow" when the freaks come out!

The lyrics foreground bodily sensations around the gut, hand, face, and feet while slipping in seemingly irrelevant racial signifiers, such as "white disc," "tequila," and "Mulatto." Dancing like Michael Jackson is all about the body, and these Asian artists are clearly embracing the corporeal as they dance and intone: "This hip hop no quantum physics . . . Spin around kick like taekwondo" – lines that privilege the physicality of hip-hop and taekwondo over the brainy pursuit of quantum physics, the domain of the stereotypical Asian nerd. When in the next verse FM glosses over the earlier racialized slippages by rapping "It don't matter if ya black or white /

Everybody get down when I'm on the mic," the ambiguities of Jackson's own relationship to blackness, captured in all its messiness in the 1991 video "Black or White" and the controversy inspired by it, become a potentially loaded subtext to what looks at first glance to be an innocent song about dancing and partying.²³

Through his music and dancing, Jackson was able to leave a lasting legacy that put to rest or at least troubled the tabloid speculations about his sexual and racial identity; as several scholars have observed, Jackson's performances in "Thriller" and "Black or White," among others, played with, acknowledged, and defied sexual and racial conventions in ways that complicate public perceptions of the superstar.²⁴ In this song and video, FM and Quest Crew align themselves with Jackson the "freak," who with his ability to transmute and take on different shapes and forms (that is, a zombie, werewolf, panther, the many iterations of himself) was able to craft alternative identities that eluded mainstream attempts to reduce or contain him within a rigid racial stereotype. Just as Jackson challenged conventional representations of black masculinity, these Asian American artists communicate through sound and image their transcendence of mainstream stereotypes without explicitly addressing their Asianness.

Halfway through the video, as Quest Crew continues to dance and FM to rhyme and make beats, an attractive young woman appears, and it looks as though the remainder of the video will tell a conventional boy-meets-girl story. The woman starts to dance and is embraced by the crew, and the story turns out to be not about a romance between a girl and a boy, but rather, about a community and its love of dance. The tightly synchronized choreography of the group dance breaks down, and the individual dancers show off their singular freestyle skills in the cipher among

cheering friends. As more and more Asian bodies occupy the space, the dancers are urged to up the ante, and the dancers oblige, performing power moves that defy gravity and the physiological limitations of non-dancing bodies. What dance theorist Susan Leigh Foster has written of an earlier generation of b-boys applies just as aptly here: “The power and eloquence of the dance resulted from bodies negotiating precarious, dangerous tensions between anatomy and gravity coupled with the critical and witty commentary on other bodies and dance forms.”²⁵

These dancers start the video by dancing like Michael Jackson, but by the end, they are dancing exuberantly as themselves, venturing farther than Jackson ever did into the physically thrilling realm of hip-hop and b-boying. The sunglasses are off, and the young Asian artists look straight into the camera, confidently showing their peers the strength and agility of their bodies, proving that, in dance, “It don’t matter if ya black or white” – or something else altogether. In fact, the virtuosic performances of Quest Crew and FM, informed by Michael Jackson, who was generally thought to be ambivalent about his own blackness, blow wide open the dominant black/white paradigm still prevalent in American discourses of race and difference. They show that hipness and artistry exist across the color spectrum, and they make explicit the cross-hatching of intercultural influences in music and dance. There is little here that conforms to the mainstream stereotype of the studious, inscrutable Oriental; through black music and dance, Asian American youths are literally embodying their refutation of such stereotypes as well as signaling their affinity to other communities of color.

Perhaps newly sensitized to its own abject position following a series of articles in

mainstream media that highlighted its racial makeup, FM has lately been pursuing a more internationalist strategy that takes the group well beyond the limits of the American pop market. The first album released post-G6, *Dirty Bass* (Cherrytree, Interscope, 2012), features popular artists from hip-hop, R&B, electronic dance music, and pop who span racial and geographic spectrums. Artists include the half-Asian/half-black rapper Tyga, Japanese mixed-race singer Crystal Kay, Barbadian group Cover Drive, mixed-race American singer Cassie, German singer Bill Kaulitz, Canadian singer Kay, Dutch DJ Sidney Samson, Cuban American rapper Pitbull, and African American rapper Flo Rida. The first single, “Live My Life,” features current pop idol Justin Bieber, and the remix of that song, also included on the album, features Bieber and Redfoo, half of LMFAO of “Party Rock” fame. Although the featured talent in “Live My Life” is North American, the video goes international, as the earlier multiracial casts of Los Angeles’ Koreatown (in “Like a G6” video) and downtown (“Rocketeer”) are replaced by the cosmopolitan one of Amsterdam. Quest Crew also dances in this video, but its Asianness is somewhat hidden by the costuming and the bodies of other dancers – emphatically multiracial – who are more prominently featured in the visuals. Asianness here is not erased, but normalized by the sheer variety of bodies occupying the frame. In this internationalized context, FM and Quest Crew are integral, rather than liminal, to the production and performance of hip-hop.

For other Asian American artists, the international music market has offered a means of escape from their position of liminality within the United States. With the widespread adoption of peer-to-peer file-sharing of music and increased mobility of people and cultural commodities around the world, pop hybrids like K-pop,

J-pop, Canto-pop, bhangra, and Pinoy rock have exploded beyond the borders of their originating countries, creating transnational communities of devoted fans in the United States, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere.²⁶ North America has served not just as a potential market for new consumers of this music, but as a source of new talent as well. Seattle-born Korean American Jay Park, for example, is among a handful of Korean Americans who have achieved pop celebrity in Korea in the last decade; Park, in particular, has helped fan the flames of the burgeoning craze for b-boying in East Asia.²⁷ MC Jin, for another, relaunched his career in Hong Kong following the disappointing sales of his first U.S.-released album. There he has collaborated with artists like Leehom Wang, a New York-born musician who stumbled onto a huge career in Asia after winning a talent contest in Taiwan, and he looms large over the popular landscape, shown on billboards endorsing a number of consumer products.

Although the international scene is not immune from racism or bigotry, it does give Asian b-boys the freedom to take off their masks. The 2007 documentary *Planet B-Boy*, filmed by Korean-Canadian director Benson Lee, follows the stories of five of the top-ranking dance crews around the world leading up to the 2005 Battle of the Year in Braunschweig, Germany. Dancers from Asia, Europe, and the United States compete as much for their country as for individual glory. The battles between the final four crews constitute the dramatic high point of the film, with Korea's Last for One taking first prize; Japan's Ichigeki second; Korea's Gamblerz third; and France's Phase-T fourth. (The American crew, Knucklehead Zoo, placed sixth.) The film concludes with the Korean public fettering the returning champions.²⁸ Although some of the dancers express jingoistic sentiments that echo widely held stereotypes

within the United States, the international scene, as portrayed in *Planet B-Boy*, seems to take for granted the cosmopolitan and multiracial cast of hip-hop and allows artists to shine on their own merits.

Asian Americans, as underrepresented as we are in the pop charts, contribute to American music by rendering concrete the liminal boundaries of popular music. From the masked JabbaWockeeZ and the silhouetted Harry Shum dance moves to FM's musical and representational mutations, there is clearly more than one way to be Asian American in hip-hop. But all these performers share an experience of abjection vis-à-vis the mainstream, so that even as they wholeheartedly engage with a musical subculture in which they grew up, they are nevertheless characterized as being its antithesis and repelled as other.

While markets abroad have welcomed some Asian American artists and the balkanized world of online social networks has created a constellation of Asian American stars celebrated by their peers, the more visible mainstream market still operates on a racist logic that requires Asian American artists to don a symbolic, if not always a literal, mask. American music (and all musics, for that matter) is about the body and its pleasures, sensations, and movements. Thus, the disciplining and constraining of certain bodies, based on physical phenotype rather than skill and ability, speak volumes about the larger body politic.

- ¹ Lisa Sagolla, "Dancing with the Jabbawoকেez," *Back Stage* 51 (31) (2010): 17; and Marie-Lorraine Mallare, "Behind the Mask," *Asianweek*, July 11, 2008, 12.
- ² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*, trans. Richard Philcox (1952; New York: Grove Press, 2008).
- ³ See Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Norman Mailer, *The White Negro* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1957); and John Leland, *Hip: The History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).
- ⁴ Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
- ⁵ For Lipsitz's definition of "strategic anti-essentialism," see George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place* (New York: Verso, 1994), 62; and for examples of artists from marginalized communities implementing strategic anti-essentialist practices, see Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads*, 69–94.
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- ⁷ Nitasha Tamar Sharma, *Hip Hop Desis: South Asian Americans, Blackness, and a Global Race Consciousness* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010).
- ⁸ For a cogent and relevant analysis of how Asian American stage artists negotiate their precarious position vis-à-vis Americanness, see Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 160. Dance scholars have also recently begun to address issues surrounding the invisibility and liminality of Asian American dancers on stage: see, for example, Yutian Wong, *Choreographing Asian America* (Middlefield, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2010); and Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).
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- ¹³ This is not to deny or minimize the bodily harm—real or metaphoric—inflicted on Asian American women. My focus here is Asian American men because they constitute the majority of the b-boys who have found some success in the mainstream; also, the issues around Asian American masculinity are, though interdependent with those around Asian American femininity, distinct and of particular pertinence in the discussion of b-boying.
- ¹⁴ Ramsay Burt, *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 52.
- ¹⁵ Kirsten Benson, “‘Glee’ Star Harry Shum Jr. Starred in One of the First iPod Ads!” Hollywood Life.com, <http://www.hollywoodlife.com/2011/10/06/harry-shum-jr-ipod-commercial/>.
- ¹⁶ Shum does play a much bigger role in Chu’s online dance series, *The Legion of Extraordinary Dancers* (a.k.a. *LXD*, 2010–2011), as a starring character and choreographer. *LXD* broke with Hollywood conventions in many ways, including in its use of an ensemble cast drawn from the dance world, which is much more racially and ethnically diverse than Hollywood. In online interviews in which he identifies the model minority stereotype that defines his Mike Chang character, Shum seems aware of some of the issues discussed in this essay. He has also vocally supported enterprises like Kollaboration, an annual Asian American talent show held across the country.
- ¹⁷ For more on FM, see Jeff Weiss, “Eastsiders (way east); Asian American hip-hop hasn’t received much in the way of props. But Koreatown-based Far East Movement has four guys aiming to change that,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 27, 2009; and Oliver Wang, “Behind Koreatown’s Far East Movement, a Deep History,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 10, 2010.
- ¹⁸ Wang, “Rapping and Repping,” 41.
- ¹⁹ Matteo, “Inside the Music: Far*East Movement,” *Allkpop*, February 20, 2009, http://www.allkpop.com/2009/02/inside_the_music_fareast_movement.
- ²⁰ Weiss, “Eastsiders (way east).”
- ²¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCtEvOdOZvg>.
- ²² See the CNN feature on Wong Fu Productions at <http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/showbiz/2009/08/15/rowlands.wong.fu.productions.cnn>.
- ²³ Several scholars have noted the incongruity in “Black or White” between the on-the-surface paean to multicultural color-blindness in both the lyrics and the video sequence of morphing faces and the explosive racial anger captured in Jackson’s panther dance that closes the video; see Tamara Roberts, “Michael Jackson’s Kingdom: Music, Race, and the Sound of the Mainstream” and Elizabeth Chin, “Michael Jackson’s Panther Dance: Double Consciousness and the Uncanny Business of Performing While Black,” in a special issue dedicated to Michael Jackson of *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 23 (1) (2011): 19–39, 58–74; and Carol Clover, “Dancin’ in the Rain,” *Critical Inquiry* 21 (1995): 722–747.
- ²⁴ See, for example, Roberts, “Michael Jackson’s Kingdom”; Chin, “Michael Jackson’s Panther Dance”; Kobena Mercer, “Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*,” in *Sound & Vision: The Music Video Reader*, ed. Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwon, and Lawrence Grossberg (1993; London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 93–108; and David Brackett, “Black or White? Michael Jackson and the Idea of Crossover,” *Popular Music and Society* 35 (2) (2012): 169–185. For an analysis of another reenactment of Michael Jackson’s dance steps by Asian dancers, see J. Lorenzo Perillo, “‘If I was not in prison, I would not be famous’: Discipline, Choreography, and Mimicry in the Philippines,” *Theater Journal* 63 (4) (2011): 607–621.

²⁵ Susan Leigh Foster, "Choreographies of Gender," *Signs* 24 (1) (1998): 14.

²⁶ For more on the transnational flows and hybridization of Asian popular culture and music, see Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002); Koichi Iwabuchi, *Rogue Flows: Trans-Asian Cultural Traffic* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004); Chua Beng Huat and Koichi Iwabuchi, eds., *East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008); Ian Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan: Rap and the Paths of Cultural Globalization* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006); Su Zheng, *Claiming Diaspora: Music, Transnationalism, and Cultural Politics in Asian/Chinese America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Anjali Gera Roy, *Bhangra Moves: From Ludhiana to London and Beyond* (Surrey, U.K.: Ashgate, 2010).

²⁷ For more on Korean Americans in K-pop, see August Brown, "K-pop Enters American Pop Consciousness," *Los Angeles Times*, April 29, 2012.

²⁸ For more on *Planet B-Boy*, see Kerry Howley, "Our Flag Is Hip Hop," *Reason* 40 (3) (2008): 60–61; and Philip W. Chung, "We Are the World," *Asianweek*, March 28, 2008, 10. An anonymous column in *Asianweek* recommends that "For Best Hip-Hop Dancers, Look to South Korea," August 8, 2008, 19.

Listening to the Now

David Robertson

Abstract: The future of classical music is almost universally thought bleak. Attendance figures are dropping, and some even question whether it is possible to write new classical music that concertgoers will be able to appreciate. This essay locates the origins of such doomsday prophecy in unquestioned assumptions and seeks to establish just the opposite: that classical music is alive and vibrant, that new creative horizons are constantly opening up, and that audiences will actually enjoy many contemporary classical compositions. The key is to present these unfamiliar works as they are understood by their composers: in a context that allows listeners to make connections between the familiar and unfamiliar, opening their minds to a wealth of new human experience.

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This essay had its genesis in a conversation several years ago during a post-concert dinner, classical music's version of a valedictory celebration. The American composer John Adams spoke of a comment he had come across in Stephen Jay Gould's book *Full House* (published in Britain as *Life's Grandeur*). The book deals with the limits of possibility in biology, abilities in baseball, and near the end, a few asides regarding general performance in athletics, the arts, and creativity. For Gould, there is a point after which one can no longer create classical music in a way that would be intelligible for listeners. He lists a golden era beginning with Bach and ending with Mahler and wonders if, in this area, human creativity has reached a wall beyond which possibilities are no longer available.

For Adams, whose work consists of imagining just such possibilities, this seemed a surprising idea to advance because it shows a misunderstanding of how composers actually work and think. It also indicates acceptance of a progression from simplicity to ever-greater complexity as the narrative for classical music's development over time. Further, it displays a lack of awareness of the place contemporary composition ought to occupy in our concert life. Most of us would agree that, presently, it sits in

most concert programs as an uninvited guest who didn't get the memo about the dress code.

That post-concert discussion with one of my favorite composers got me thinking about how certain cultural ideas can take root and impede meaningful debate and understanding. We often try to reduce complex ideas into more manageable ones in order to deal with them, even if in the end the subject has lost so many important nuances that any conclusions will be false and unhelpful. What amazed me was that if someone as thoughtful as Stephen Jay Gould was thinking this way, then we really did have a problem.

Gould was writing as someone who deeply loves classical music, particularly a kind of classical music that obtained for close to three hundred years. The music he refers to is largely independent of theater; a repertoire that can be called concert music, both vocal and instrumental, chamber and orchestral. It was conceived and supported in the relatively homogeneous cultural climate of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and present-day Germany. While this category is drawn very broadly, it is true that the music of this period shows remarkable richness as demonstrated by its status as the bedrock of most classical programming today. Other strains have been added to this canon according to varying tastes and shifting cultural opinions. We might add to the list Russians and Slavs from the late nineteenth century, or French from the same period and into the early twentieth century. For those with even broader tastes, there are British, Scandinavian, Spanish, Italian, Latin American, and even North American musics that could be included.

The result at this point in the twenty-first century is what is generally regarded as "classical music." I happen to occupy a position professionally – conductor – that

arouses suspicion in most people: what does he actually do? Aside from my aerobic duties during a concert performance, in my role as leader I am also frequently responsible for the selection and sequence of pieces that constitute one of classical music's products, the concert program.

You have probably read or heard about the death of classical music; the reports have been around for quite a while now. If this is news to you, just search Google for "death of classical music" and watch with delight as 46,700,000 results return in 0.18 seconds! One of the reasons this discourse is so frequently unproductive is that it is often begun without realizing how many key assumptions are made at the outset. For example, referring to classical music as a "product" already brings in the language and expectations of market economics, skewing any discussion in the direction of music as a commodity to purchase and consume rather than as an activity to experience.

The economic realities involved in making music are certainly a pertinent and valid subject. Questions regarding the finances required to reproduce, at a high level of quality, musical works of the past (especially when the forces required might include more than a hundred instrumentalists, vocal soloists, and a large chorus) are paramount. Further, whom is this form of art/entertainment addressing? Why should we go to all the trouble of playing these works live when there are so many technological options for accessing them? However, these different questions are often discussed simultaneously, resulting in the conclusion that there is no creativity left (or pace Gould, possible) in classical music – that, at best, we are witnessing its painfully slow demise and fossilization.

I beg to differ.

For nine years, I was music director of a group whose mission was to play the music

of our time. The largest proportion of finances for the group came from the French Ministry of Culture. The assumptions about repertoire were clear enough that no one had to specify that we were not to play rock, or hip-hop, or any other form of “popular” music. We were in the cultural business of playing the most contemporary strain of “classical” music. Aesthetic discussions aside, I was privileged in this position to work with and get to know dozens of composers personally, gaining insight into their wide-ranging poetic ideas and inspirations. What I learned from these interactions was an appreciation of the enormous diversity of styles that present-day composers are using. I also realized that none of the composers saw themselves as working apart from pre-established musical traditions. Each had a different position to the past, but they could not ignore it anymore than any of us can.

When a composer imagines a sound and then notates it for someone else there are lots of common beliefs in play. The pitch will probably be standard: it will relate to existing instruments and therefore to habits of tone production and listening that have been established for quite a while. The composer’s way of dealing with musical time will be influenced by what has been heard and experienced in previous music, as well as what has had the best success in past practice. The culture informing the society in which the composer grew up also plays an enormous role. And there is consideration of the environment in which the music will be performed: on its own in a concert, as part of a school activity, in connection with dance, or as an accompaniment to visual imagery of some kind.

What interests me is the part these composing musicians bring to the human experience: the wonder. Music is created

out of thin air. Where before there was nothing at all, suddenly there is something so enjoyable and delightful, so rich in layers of meaning that we often refer to this something as a work of art. There is invention and surprise, but there are also core beliefs very much held in common. We make music based on these shared ideas about the definition of music and its presentation.

My profession consists of trying to use creatively what already exists (institutions, repertoire, audience curiosity) in order to represent the vast wealth of human expression found in “classical” music, in my case a tradition beginning around the seventeenth century and continuing today. If we play only the music of the past, what meaning does its beauty (or the contrary) have for us today without a musical context that relates it to our present experience? The connection to the human condition that classical music provides is singular. It happens in time and can collapse centuries into a few minutes. We can suddenly inhabit areas of feeling that traverse generations, opening us up to unexpected parts of ourselves. This is not only found in the notion of “a distant mirror,” as when we see our own sentiments reflected in, say, a Schubert song; it is also to be discovered in the musical conversation across time. That is when things really get interesting.

When, in 1910, Ralph Vaughn Williams writes a work based on music from the 1500s by Thomas Tallis, he is reaching through time to grasp hold of something ephemeral and fleeting but which lives on in something as ephemeral and fleeting as the human capacity for feeling and empathy. When I put that work on a program with Thomas Adès’s 2005 Violin Concerto “Concentric Paths,” there is a point in the second movement (itself in the antiquated form of a passacaglia) when everyone in the audience (I believe) has an epiphany that is entirely musical. It is a

feeling difficult to put into words and one that, most important, cannot be achieved any other way. The elation of this moment is awe-inspiring. Without all three composers' involvement – without the perspectives of all three – we would not have that wondrous musical revelation.

Most composers do not quote other composers consciously. There are indeed works that consist of quotations (Luciano Berio's *Sinfonia* or Bernd Alois Zimmermann's *Musique pour les soupers de Roi Ubu*), but most composers work at creating "new" music. They are of course aware of a great deal of different music by the time they are writing, and their personal choices reflect the kinds of music that they are drawn to. This tendency gives the programmer an amazing opportunity to have musical dialogue across any given concert. At first glance this might seem a bit illogical. When author David Lodge writes in *Small World* of the influence of T. S. Eliot on Shakespeare, initially we read it as a joke. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that once you have experienced *The Waste Land*, *King Lear* will never be the same. Music is no different. How we receive history is never fixed, and composers are not immune to this situation any more than are listeners. Inevitably, we realize that our appreciation for those two immense columns of sound that are the opening chords of Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony has changed after we hear Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, Iannis Xenakis's *Jonchaies*, or even the power chords of AC/DC. Indeed, many of Stravinsky's rhythms have been influenced in our mind's ear retroactively by the rhythmic intricacies and drive of funk or techno music. There is no way to get around this, and it might be experienced by many as negative; but I see it as a source of excitement. In this way especially, today's composers are living with us in our time, and their take on our expe-

riences should be, at the very least, interesting to us.

But what about audience curiosity? This may come as a surprise, but reports from the field are not rosy. If one looks at the concert attendance surveys done by reputable firms, it is obvious that the drop-off in audience enjoyment for "modern" music is colossal.

Allow me this experiment: name five visual artists from before the twentieth century that you love; now name five from after 1900. Chances are good that we share some favorites in that list. Now think of five visual artists who you are certain are alive. Usually the non-specialist, like me, can do pretty well with the first ten, but that last group is considerably harder. Obviously, our contemporaries have had less time to become established in common cultural heritage. You will hear this cliché used as a rallying cry in new music circles – something along the lines of, "They complained about Beethoven as well!" While there is a natural process of elimination throughout history, that line of argument is too facile and misses the point.

When a survey asks, how do you like Russian symphonic repertoire, even the casual music lover can think of at least one piece by name (Tchaikovsky anyone?). If you ask the same question about a composer post-1950, our casual music lover will probably think of some horrid experience that she had and hopes never to have again. My hunch has always been that these listeners will not be able to attribute a name to the unpleasant piece (although Schoenberg will probably be invoked as a catchall), but the answer for the survey is the same. So let's imagine a different option. Listeners – all of us – try to understand an unfamiliar work in terms of the repertoire we already know, and this fact needs to be taken into account when

trying to find the right context for a “new” work. If you were to ask the audience members at a recent concert of mine that began with Dvorak’s *Symphony No. 7* and closed with Strauss’s *Four Last Songs* how they liked the piece in the middle (George Crumb’s *A Haunted Landscape* from 1984, which they were hearing for the first time) the response would probably be very favorable. This is because the Dvorak symphony contains music that sets up the ideas of atmosphere that Crumb is evoking, and the tensions in his musical landscape are beautifully grounded by Strauss’s lyricism, both pieces working perfectly as a frame for the new work. My assumption is based on anecdotal evidence garnered from several weeks of conversations with diverse patrons after the concert, and it demonstrates why I do not work for a survey firm.

The problem has to do with generalizations. In an age where iTunes refers to everything – regardless of length, style, or genre – as a “song,” I realize that making this point is akin to jousting with windmills. We generalize to simplify discussion and make decisions. We generalize about repertoire, taste, and audiences. We base ideas of success on attendance figures, which contain unnoticed generalizations about the appropriate size of the hall in which the music is presented. It is, however, much harder to generalize about the quality of an individual’s personal experience of a program, because that means we are talking about a specific person. So we rarely ask what an individual got out of the experience, because it is simply too difficult to measure. Yet the quality of the individual experience is the reason for the whole thing in the first place!

The fascinating parts of music are the details in a particular work that evoke unique changes in each of us. Our thoughts and feelings interact with music in ways

that can indeed be generalized, but they are of interest to us individually for what they bring out in our own experience. I am aware of this every time I finish conducting a piece and turn around, making eye contact with those who have just been sharing the music with me. We can generalize to our heart’s content about the public and its tastes, but I look around and see the faces of individual beings all with slightly different expressions – beings who all have just entered into a series of personal connections that only they can know, that only they can have with what was played. Every listener is important, and from their individual points of view, we really only play the concert for them. It is impractical to play one concert two thousand times, so we collect that number of individuals at one event. This is where generalizations make their necessary entrance.

One telling generalization about human nature and music comes from a wonderful essay in scientist Robert Sapolsky’s book *Monkeyluv*. He talks about the way *Homo sapiens*’ minds seem to close to new musical stimuli around the time we reach 25 years of age. In other words, if you have been exposed to the rock band Radiohead by age 25, you’re in luck; if not, then it is probably off-limits to you. While this is largely true, particularly in popular music, Sapolsky nonetheless joyously discovers some music that he finds wonderful. In the essay, he writes about the huge social cachet involved, the way music is often used to define a group, so he keeps the name of his newfound music to himself in order not to drag down its “hip” quality among younger members of his research lab. (“Doo-wop and total serialism are sooo ’50s, dude!”) Part of my challenge as a concert programmer is to figure out the best way to free up listening habits for many individuals simultaneously because today’s composers

cannot hope to have their music heard by ten year olds; they must hope that, like Sapolsky, many old dogs can be taught new tricks, or at least new listening habits. As a programmer, I have to hope that as well.

Perhaps nowadays we should look at the combination of works on a program as a “playlist.” People like to share playlists, which can be listened to over and over in various contexts: jogging, shopping, riding the bus, playing in the background when friends come to visit, or while surfing the Web. The essential difference behind our classical music concert playlist is that we are dealing with a one-time, unrepeatable event. It is a unique form of human communication. It expects a focus on the music at the exclusion of everything else. (“Please turn off all cell phones, watch alarms, and other electronic devices.”) Given our current electronic interconnectedness, this is already a tall order. So when I consider the public concert, I see it as a forum where we all accept as our goal the idea of contemplating and enjoying musical sound. My one-time-only playlist has to be chosen and performed with great care. To balance the familiar with the unfamiliar, many questions need to be asked at the outset. What else is on the program; what is its duration; will we have enough time to prepare it properly; where does it come in the program; is there a soloist? How often does the audience get to experience music related to the unfamiliar item? What time of day will the concert take place, and where? Once you have found a proper musical context for the new work, ideally with the right combination of pieces, are there any supports before or during the concert that can give listeners an extra frame of reference to hold onto, something that helps inform their listening to make it as active as possible?

I am not alone in thinking this way. Composers themselves also ask these

questions. Despite polemics to the contrary, I have rarely encountered composers who do not care if you listen. What they are interested in are sounds – their combinations, the meanings and emotions they convey. The variety that composers represent as a group is staggering in its diversity, but luckily has its parallel in the different possible audience members. It is a challenge for composer and listener alike that there is not one accepted style they can all be certain of from the beginning. Composers enter into a pact of trust with listeners. They will attempt to make you aware of the kind of language they will be working with from the start. They will have to articulate some sort of form for their sounds. They will adopt various propositions regarding the aesthetics and will work with those ideas consistently. They are aware that, unlike visual art, they bear the responsibility for how much time you spend contemplating their work. They only hope you will listen with an open mind. And there’s the rub!

So why am I so worry-free despite constant reports of gloom from the classical music world? Because the DNA all music shares allows listeners to make connections between familiar and unfamiliar works, opening their minds to a powerful and joyous part of the human experience: simply put, our universal, innate ability for surprise. How lucky we are that this quality is a foundation of being alive! The world of music, even just the small category of classical music, is so huge that we can never know all of it. It tells us things we cannot imagine before we hear it, and after we have listened to it we cannot imagine our lives, ourselves, without it. It is a fundamental part of the ever-becoming you. Try thinking of who you would be without knowing one of your favorite songs, and you begin to see the shaping power of music.

I have been fortunate to meet many people whose reaction to something new is

not rejection but a sense of wonder and surprise. The gratitude they express would be reason enough to continue. I have seen these expressions all around the globe. These individuals are frequently the ones who fly in the face of generalizations about age, ethnic background, education, and taste in classical music. For them the world continually opens up in an unexpected way through musical magic. They discover something to love, admire, and cherish that did not exist for them before we played it. It is a miracle. It's no wonder that we wonder. It's no wonder that musicians were born to share.

Perhaps many of the new pieces I play will have a tough time being immediately embraced by a large number of people. Classical music's richness is deep, and listeners may feel that their personal musical world is established, replete without the need for anything new. People resist change; old habits die hard; generalizations abide. And yet, if we face the world with an open mind, we cannot escape our own capacity for surprise, sometimes when we least expect it: in the beauty of a sunrise, in a child's sudden smile, in an as yet unheard musical phrase.

Homophobia in Twentieth-Century Music: The Crucible of America's Sound

Nadine Hubbs

Abstract: Challenging notions of the composer as solitary genius and of twentieth-century homophobia as a simple destructive force, I trace a new genealogy of Coplandian tonal modernism – “America’s sound” as heard in works like “Rodeo,” “Appalachian Spring,” and “Fanfare for the Common Man” – and glean new sociosexual meanings in “cryptic” modernist abstraction like that of Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson’s opera “Four Saints in Three Acts.” I consider gay white male tonalists collectively to highlight how shared social identities shaped production and style in musical modernism, and I recast gay composers’ close-knit social/sexual/creative/professional alliances as, not sexually nepotistic cabals, but an adaptive and richly productive response to the constraints of an intensely homophobic moment. The essay underscores the pivotal role of the new hetero/homo concept in twentieth-century American culture, and of queer impetuses in American artistic modernism.

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Around 1938, following decades of anxious fretting over the lack of a distinct American voice in concert music, something fresh and new emerged and at last defined an American national sound. It was elegantly clear and stately while also broadly appealing and *tonal*, and it became best known through Aaron Copland’s music, especially in such works as *Appalachian Spring*, *Fanfare for the Common Man*, *Rodeo*, and *Billy the Kid*. By now we have heard it in Hollywood westerns and dramas, car and airline commercials, and campaigns for the American Beef Council. We have learned to conjure rugged cowboys, vast golden prairies, and pioneer lives of hardship and simple faith whenever we hear Copland or his many imitators. We may not even know we are hearing Copland, for the sound is now practically public domain. But we know what it means.

This music means *America* – in its most beloved, idealized, simple-but-dignified form. It is the soundtrack of our national rituals. Copland’s music represents the American spirit in times of celebration – the opening ceremony of the 2002 Olympics in

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Salt Lake City, for example – and it gives voice to our national mourning: think of the memorial services following 9/11. (Copland’s setting of “At the River” was especially powerful.) How did it happen that this cherished national music, what I am calling America’s sound, came to be composed by a gay man in the most homophobic period in U.S. history? And what does it mean that the America of prairie cowboys and pioneer newlyweds was rendered musically by this leftist, Jewish homosexual from Brooklyn?

But let me back up a step. I don’t think it is quite right to say that there was “a gay composer” behind the creation of America’s sound. Rather, there was a whole posse of gay composers – and a famous lesbian author, to boot. This is not entirely a new idea. For decades, rumors churned in the classical music world about the “gay mafia” that ruled American composition. These rumors were deeply homophobic, but I want to pay close attention to them nevertheless. They speak to us of what was feared and loathed in this context and period, roughly the 1930s through the 1970s. There was fear and loathing not just for the notion that influential gay composers were on the scene, but for the idea that they constituted some sort of group. This did not jibe with the prevailing heterosexual and patriarchal ethos. A real man is a rugged individualist. A real composer is a solitary genius. And conventional wisdom held that behind every great man stood a loving and devoted woman.

Gay tonalists indeed functioned as a group, and in ways that affected the course of history. The circle of gay American composers that included Virgil Thomson and Aaron Copland as the elders, plus Marc Blitzstein, Paul Bowles, David Diamond, Leonard Bernstein, and Ned Rorem, interacted with and influenced each other in various dimensions: professional, social, artistic, and at times sexual. But until very

recently, only enemies would have spoken of the gay tonalists’ group-ness or “tribalism.” During the group’s 1940s heyday and for decades after, the mere suggestion of a link between one gay composer and another sufficed to discredit the composers and their work. Relations of collegial and familial support were expected, and respected, among straight composers. The same relations among composers identified as homosexual, however, were taken as proof of conspiracy and of the illegitimacy of their achievements.¹

Musicologists today can acknowledge the queerness of various composers (and the connections between them) without automatically inciting homophobic reaction and dismissal. But if we view this information within the frame of heteronormative historiography – which decrees, for example, that composers be men of individual genius – then we still do not get at the story, or the significance, of the gay Americana tonalists. In other words, for purposes of U.S. musical and cultural history it is crucial, not incidental, that these guys were queer – but we can perceive that only if we take a queer-attuned perspective in our analysis. We need a queer eye, historiographically speaking, to see how the American histories of sexualized social identity and national cultural identity converged and shaped one another within the Thomson-Copland circle of gay white male composers in 1930s and 1940s New York.

The very fact that there was a Thomson-Copland circle of gay Americana tonalists had everything to do with queerness. These artists banded together as members of a minoritized group that had been newly defined in the twentieth century by the authority of medical science and law, and that was subject to intense scrutiny and social stigma. We can readily imagine why queer composers might have linked up in this era of psychosexual pathology,

Hollywood's censorship code, sex-crime panics, anti-sodomy statutes, and vice raids. And there is little left to the imagination in some of the homophobic rumors, libels, and conspiracy theories that surrounded these composers, as with French-born Edgard Varèse's comments to fellow composer Carl Ruggles about Copland: "use your arse as a prick garage – or your mouth as a night lodging and . . . N[ew] Y[ork] is yours."² So, in this milieu, gay composers often connected with each other, both within and across generations – as in gay life. They shared contacts and resources, knowledge and critique. They mentored and apprenticed, nurtured and competed with one another. They performed and programmed, admired and envied each other's work. They influenced each other personally, professionally, and aesthetically. In fact, the boundaries between these categories, here as in gay life generally, were often blurry to nonexistent.

The Coplandian sound itself was inspired by and modeled on musical simplicities invented by Thomson, who himself was inspired after reading the work of the lesbian American author Gertrude Stein. Copland in his first eighteen years of composing showed little inclination to step outside the Stravinskian dissonant modernism he had learned from Nadia Boulanger. Thomson was a very different sort of character from the serene, regular Copland: a Dada sympathizer both serious and irreverent in his aesthetic judgments, he was a sharp-witted brilliant queen of the highest order. Thomson decided while still in his twenties that he did not need the sanction of the compositional establishment or what he called its "correct facade of dissonance." In 1926 in Paris, under the influence of Stein's avant-garde writings and artistic theories, this former Kansas City church organist began composing music just as simple as he pleased.³ "Plain as Dick's hatband,"

Thomson called his harmonies. "Darn-fool ditties," he dubbed his tunes. His music was so forthright and simple that some cognoscenti thought it was dum-dum and fled, in terror and befuddlement. That it was often pretty was also unsettling in this modernist context. Perhaps most audaciously, Thomson's music was tonal.

Thomson and Copland drew close in the early 1930s, when both were occupied with mentoring the young Paul Bowles, with whom Copland was madly, unrequitedly, in love. By the end of the decade Copland had given up on courting the elusive Bowles but had come to know a lot of Thomson's music, in which he found, by his own description, "a lesson in how to treat Americana."⁴ In 1938, Copland himself would adopt tonal simplicities and, inspired by Thomson's example of the previous year, would attempt an American ballet. The result was *Billy the Kid*, Copland's breakthrough Americana work and the first in what would be a series of tonal, populist megahits.

In the 1990s especially, certain musicologists, some quite prominent and well placed, declared for the record that a composer's sexuality cannot have any relevance to his or her work, or to legitimate musicological inquiry.⁵ I do not doubt that it is possible to sincerely believe that – but only if one has no clue as to how modern sexuality functions, or what it comprises, as an erotic, affectional, and social positioning. But if, in our music histories, sexuality is assumed to encompass only bedroom acts, if official authoritative discourses are all we know, if composers are studied one self-contained male genius at a time, then it is not sexuality that is rendered irrelevant, but *homosexuality* – because the frame of observation is already overwritten by heterosexual norms, straight ways of knowing and being in the world.

Relatedly, twentieth-century music scholarship and cultural commentary

never breathed a word about the remarkably queer lineage of America's sound. Nor have these discourses been known to celebrate the productivity of pederasty in U.S. national culture. Yet it was enormously productive in the case of Copland, whose legendary mentoring of younger composers was crucial to establishing a long-awaited American music culture, and was self-consciously aligned with a tradition of erotic man-youth mentoring going back to the Greeks. Pederasty was a venerated pillar of the radically male-dominated culture of ancient Greece. It had similar importance in the radically male-dominated culture of twentieth-century American classical music and, from there, in U.S. national culture – though it has been buried, rather than venerated, in our critical and historical accounts. In the interest of remedying this situation at last, I have proposed that Copland, long known as “the dean of American music,” should be known instead as its gay daddy.⁶

One thing I am suggesting by all of this is that there are ways in which tonal Americana music is gay – whether or not it “sounds gay,” to borrow the terms in which sensational media coverage has sometimes mocked the question. But let us consider whether this music somehow does sound gay. First, surely, we can say that the Americana music of Thomson, Copland, and company sounds consonant and tonal. It sounded that way to its original audiences, too – perhaps even more so to them, by contrast to the dissonance and atonality that were then prevalent. Second, tonal Americana sounded simple; and this characterization almost certainly belongs more to the music's original context than to our own. Past audiences took in more modernist “complexity music” than many of us do now and would have heard tonal Americana as simple by contrast. Another reason the Coplandian idiom

does not tend to strike us as especially simple is that it became so ubiquitous. Its formal transparency and folkish qualities are thoroughly familiar and normalized to our ears.

Finally, tonal Americana sounded French. Does it still sound French? Probably not so much. Understandings like these are completely contingent on the reception context. In the 1930s and 1940s, Austro-German music was the standard of “great” music and of classical music generally. Thomson, Copland, Diamond, Bowles, and Rorem, especially, self-consciously positioned their work against German music and its dominance. Whether or not their music sounds French to us, or even sounded French to its original listeners, labeling it as French in the mid-twentieth century could convey coded meanings about the music and its creators, including feminizing and queering connotations. These same sex/gender connotations also attached to tonality and simplicity amid a modernist musical culture in which dissonance, boisterousness, and complexity were coded as daring, advanced, and original – hence, manly.

Am I therefore claiming that, say, Copland's *Appalachian Spring* or Bernstein's score for *On the Town* (1944) “sound gay”? No. I am saying that they *did* sound gay, according to signifying codes that operated in a certain period (from as early as the 1920s through the 1970s or 1980s) and in a certain setting (among American music-world insiders of the time). There is a wonderful story that illustrates how Thomson understood the sexual coding of modernist musical styles. In his first meeting with the younger composer Ben Weber – probably in the early 1940s – he immediately gave Weber the third degree. Upon confirming that Weber was a) a homosexual, and b) an atonal composer, Thomson croaked, “Well, you can't be both. Now which is it?”⁷

With Thomson's witty riposte, two big bad binarisms – hetero/homo and atonal/tonal – rear their heads and appear as crucially defining and (by whatever means) mutually determining. Assuming the role of sexual and stylistic boundary enforcer, the veritable homo-tonal police, Thomson highlighted some of the governing laws of his musical-political realm in a way that also hints at their oppressiveness, and certainly their arbitrariness. Yet identity binarisms were something Thomson had to learn to negotiate. He was born into an era obsessed with classifying human identity types and defining exact boundaries among them. Both Thomson and Copland were born at the turn of what would come to be called “the American century,” at a moment that also witnessed the birth of artistic modernism and (for U.S. purposes) the birth of the homosexual.⁸

Scarcely earlier, in 1895, Oscar Wilde had endured his trials and judgment. Wilde's suffering in Reading Gaol and his extraordinary response in *De Profundis*, his long letter out of the depths of his imprisonment, established a model for twentieth-century homosexual subjectivity. The first modern homosexual, in his brutal martyrdom, showed that creating art could be the response to queer suffering and persecution, and artistic experience the basis of queer spirituality. Many twentieth-century queers followed Saint Oscar into the artistic priesthood, and Stein and Thomson's abstract, supposedly indecipherable opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* is a tribute to this very phenomenon, in its staging of sixteenth-century Spanish nuns and monks – in same-sex pairings and groupings – to represent twentieth-century American artists like Stein, Thomson, and their comrades. Artistic modernism's fascination with abstraction owed much, I believe, to the profusion of homosexuals in the arts at this time and their need to

maintain ambiguity around their desires, identities, and preoccupations.

No artist commanded ambiguity like the composer. And music offered its listeners ambiguity as well: it seemed to blur the bounds of conventional selfhood, to afford an escape from identity, even as it sharpened sensations and crystallized emotions. These facts provide cultural-historical explanation for the prevalence of queers in twentieth-century American classical music, but they certainly do not suffice to explain the remarkable success of Copland and his gay circle. Sure, U.S. classical music was a queer magnet in the decades following the advent of homo/hetero classification. But that by no means guaranteed that queer composers would succeed where generations of composers had already failed – in creating a widely embraced, distinctly American musical idiom. The members of the Thomson-Copland circle succeeded not just in spite of their homosexuality, but in direct relation to it. Does this mean that they derived some sort of inherent advantage from their deviant sexuality? Perhaps their story evinces the presence of a tonal chromosome orbiting the gay gene?

If someone wants to make that argument, then go ahead; knock yourself out. But it should be clear by now that it has nothing to do with my argument, which examines the cultural-historical conditions that surrounded the gay tonalists, and how these talented and resourceful artists worked within and against such conditions to fashion their lives, art, and personas. Central here are the structures of self-formation and subjectivity that prevailed in the mid-twentieth century, and how gay composers navigated them. The structures have changed somewhat, but we are all still obliged to navigate them and thus to “compose ourselves” in relation to gender and sexuality, race and class.

Salient among the determining conditions for Copland and his cohort was homophobia. It erupted acidly in Varèse's correspondence with Ruggles, and it circulated in rumors and conspiracy theories throughout the mid-century U.S. music world. Homophobia was a destructive impulse, but gay composers' responses to it were often productive. Many modern queer subjects in various walks of life found solace and self-expression in music. But the queer music devotees in the Thomson-Copland circle also closely associated with one another, shared knowledge and resources, and thus created a rich musical subculture that gave birth to an important national music culture. Homophobia contributed to the rise of tonal Americana in the late 1930s: it was the crucible in which gay composers forged such strong personal and professional bonds.

But homophobia also contributed to the fall of Coplandian music in the 1950s, when rumors went aboveground and headlines warned that a homosexual cultural take-

over was Stalin's plot for destroying America. The Cold War tenor of the times favored the strains of atonal serialism – heard not only as quasi-scientific, but as more virile.⁹

ENDNOTES

- 1 See Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 7, 101 – 102.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 156. Compare also the reported purges of homosexual students and faculty from the Eastman School of Music in the 1930s and 1940s; see *ibid.*, esp. 225 n.25.
- 3 Concerning this “correct facade” and Thomson's 1926 epiphanies, see *ibid.*, 43, 11 – 12.
- 4 The quote is from a 1942 letter from Copland to Thomson concerning Thomson's film score for *The River*; see *ibid.*, 197 n.63.
- 5 See especially the “Schubert and Sexuality” special issue of *19th Century Music* 27 (1) (1993).
- 6 See Hubbs, *Queer Composition*, 11, 85 – 89.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 128.
- 8 On this last periodization see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890 – 1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).
- 9 See *ibid.*, chap. 4; also Michael Sherry, *Gay Artists in Modern American Culture: An Imagined Conspiracy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

The Ruth Crawford Seeger Sessions

Ellie M. Hisama

Abstract: Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901 – 1953), an American experimental composer active in the 1920s and 1930s, devoted the second half of her career to transcribing, arranging, performing, teaching, and writing about American folk music. Many works from Crawford Seeger’s collections for children, including “Nineteen American Folk Songs” and “American Folk Songs for Children,” are widely sung and recorded, but her monumental efforts to publish them often remain unacknowledged. This article underscores the link between her work in American traditional music and Bruce Springsteen’s best-selling 2006 album “We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions” in order to give Crawford Seeger due credit for her contributions. By examining her prose writings and song settings, this article illuminates aspects of her thinking about American traditional music and elements of her unusual and striking arrangements, which were deeply informed by her modernist ear.

Of his 2006 album *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*, Bruce Springsteen remarked: “Growing up as a rock ‘n’ roll kid, I didn’t know a lot about Pete’s music or the depth of his influence. So I headed to the record store and came back with an armful of Pete Seeger records. Over the next few days of listening, the wealth of songs, their richness and power changed what I thought I knew about ‘folk music.’ Hearing this music and our initial ‘97 session for Pete’s record sent me off, casually at first, on a quest.”¹

A tribute to a key figure in the folk revival, Springsteen’s recording stirs up discussion about the complex processes of transmission and influence in American traditional music. His rendition on *We Shall Overcome* of several traditional American tunes, such as “Froggie Went a-Courtin’,” “John Henry,” “Erie Canal,” “Buffalo Gals,” and “Old Dan Tucker,” can be traced back five decades to Pete Seeger, who first recorded them in the 1950s.² The renewed interest in Pete Seeger spurred by Springsteen’s Grammy-winning, best-selling album and his international Seeger Sessions tours has unfortunately not extended to another Seeger,

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Ruth Crawford Seeger, who brought numerous children's songs to Pete's attention and whose songbooks Pete knew.³ Peggy Seeger, Pete's sister, has observed that several of the songs on Bruce Springsteen's album are ones Pete got straight from her mother, who was Pete's stepmother.⁴

An American avant-garde composer, Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901–1953) was also a gifted transcriber and arranger of American traditional music from the mid-1930s until her premature death from cancer.⁵ Springsteen's lively *Seeger Sessions* is a laudable project (Pete Seeger called it "a great honor"⁶), but it is unfortunate that most fans of the album and of Springsteen's performances of the songs associate the "Seeger" in the album's title with only the most widely known member of the Seeger family. Although Crawford Seeger is now entering the "canon" of twentieth-century Western art music through several doors – as an American composer, as a female composer, and as an innovator and experimentalist – she should surely be lauded for the remarkable contributions she made to American traditional music, work that continues to attract musicians and listeners.⁷ I return to the well of Crawford Seeger's song collections from which Pete Seeger dipped his bucket in an effort to establish a link from Springsteen's powerful album back to Crawford Seeger, who listened and transcribed, notated and arranged, described and published hundreds of songs that continue to be sung and circulated around the globe.⁸ In doing so, I hope to draw the attention of another generation of musicians, listeners, and scholars to Crawford Seeger, a critical figure in the folk revival whose contributions deserve recognition.⁹

Unlike Cecil Sharp or John and Alan Lomax, Crawford Seeger was not a collector of folksongs, as she was unable to

travel for extended periods given her family responsibilities. But her contributions to American traditional music are many and include her painstaking work in transcribing tunes collected by the Lomaxes; her brilliant and original arrangements of American traditional music in her songbooks for children; her teaching of these songs through her work with young children (including her own family); and her extensive written commentary on many aspects of folksong transcription and performance, valuable for both scholars and teachers of young musicians. This essay focuses on her work as an arranger of and writer on folk songs, with the hope that it will spur further research on her transcribing, arranging, and writing.

In her memoir *Sing It Pretty*, folk musician and researcher Bess Lomax Hawes recalls Crawford Seeger's work in transcription:

I marveled at her strategies. She took over only a little corner of a downstairs room and assembled a recording machine, a rack for the discs, a tiny desk, and a professional architect's drafting board on which she eventually copied her completed musical transcriptions in a gorgeous kind of penmanship. . . . She used pots of the blackest India ink and large thick sheets of the whitest music manuscript paper. . . . Her minuscule desk contained pencils, note paper, and separate sheets on which she made a tick mark every time she listened to each song she transcribed – eighty or ninety times, some of them.¹⁰

Crawford Seeger's songbooks not only preserved and interpreted American traditional music, but they also helped establish its importance at a time rife with imitations of the original music, watered down to make it palatable to listeners comfortable with sugary songs but

unaccustomed to whole-grain musical victuals. As Peggy Seeger and her brother Mike Seeger noted of Crawford Seeger's *American Folk Songs for Children*:

When our mother made this collection of 94 songs in the 1940s, "folk" had not yet made it into the charts, discs, the concert circuits – or into the national consciousness. It was still associated with the rural backwoods and at that time folk-as-the-folk-sang-it was a really new sound. . . . Standard musical fare for children . . . was digested so many times by censors and music editors that the resulting product was cultural pap: gone the meat, bones, nerves, muscles, heart.¹¹

According to Hawes, "[M]ost people at the time [of Crawford Seeger's work on *Our Singing Country* during the late 1930s] thought of the folksong as simple, natural, naive, spontaneous, self-generated, and definitely crude."¹² Crawford Seeger noted that she was "disturbed by the sweetness and lack of backbone in nursery songs."¹³ Her exacting transcriptions, the result of listening to a recording dozens of times, communicated a new, ethical vision of American traditional music, one that tried to remain true to the music as it was then performed.

For someone who contributed such a rich lode to American traditional music, Ruth Crawford Seeger's training as a classical musician is unusual. Born in 1901 in East Liverpool, Ohio, Crawford grew up in Florida and studied piano, music theory, and composition in Chicago, where she met writer and poet Carl Sandburg and taught piano to his daughters.¹⁴ Moving to New York in 1929 drew her into the heady world of modernist music and art, and brought her music to the attention of important musical figures of the day, including Henry Cowell, Marion Bauer, and Charles Seeger. After studying with Seeger, Crawford's style of composition

took a distinct turn toward contrapuntal, linear organization, which can be heard in her celebrated *String Quartet 1931*, *Piano Study in Mixed Accents*, and other works dating from 1930 onward. A remarkably fresh voice in what was known as "ultra-modern" composition during the 1920s and 1930s, Crawford composed relatively few works, which include a small but meticulously crafted group of songs, pieces for solo piano, a string quartet, and various chamber ensembles.¹⁵

The year 1932 was a turning point for Crawford, as the professional strands of her work continued to intertwine with the personal. She married Charles Seeger, and the first of her four children, Michael (Mike), was born in 1933. Not coincidentally, she stopped composing around the time her children were born, a "decision born of indecision" as she phrased it, and a professional move regretted by many admirers of her compositions.¹⁶ The Great Depression deeply affected Ruth and Charles Seeger's views about their continued involvement with modernist music. From the mid-1930s to the early 1950s, Crawford Seeger shifted the focus of her work to traditional American music, teaching at a number of area schools in addition to working as a music editor for the Lomaxes and publishing song collections of her own.

Musicologists, composers, and theorists of twentieth-century music and of American music have worked to recover Crawford's compositions, wanting to balance the historical record with regard to women composers and to explore noteworthy yet little-known music. Thanks to these efforts, students can now encounter Crawford's compositions in their music lessons, courses, textbooks, and anthologies.¹⁷ Her transcriptions and arrangements of traditional music – many drawn from her husband's and John and Alan Lomax's recordings made across the United States –

were published in several collections over a twenty-five-year period and are equally important contributions to American musical life. Yet credit for this important work is not given frequently enough to Crawford Seeger, as the reception of Springsteen's CD and tour demonstrates. "Ruth Crawford Seeger" is still not a household name, although her transcriptions and arrangements are embedded in American musical life through the circulation of her published work, and through performances of the song arrangements by Pete, Peggy, Mike, and many other musicians. Music ranging from the four songs she arranged for Carl Sandburg's *The American Songbag* (1927); to her work as music editor for John A. and Alan Lomax's illustrious collection *Our Singing Country: A Second Volume of American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1941); to her arrangements in her own volumes *Nineteen American Folk Songs for Piano* (1936–1938), *American Folk Songs for Children* (1948), *Animal Folk Songs for Children* (1950), and *American Folk Songs for Christmas* (1953); to her posthumously published *Let's Build a Railroad* (1954) have brought Crawford's work to the fingers, voices, and ears of countless people. For example, former Del Fuegos band member Dan Zanes, who now performs and records music for children, remarked about Crawford Seeger's work:

There's a book by Ruth Crawford Seeger, "American Folk Songs for Children," . . . and she talks about the child's experience, understanding the world through music. And so I started thinking about that, and thinking about that was a whole lot more interesting than what I had been doing – singing about old girlfriends to people that were roughly my age.¹⁸

For the musicians, scholars, and students who welcomed the disruption to the assumed narrative about the male-

dominated world of musical modernism, the silence of Crawford's compositional voice between 1932 and 1952 (save for her 1939 orchestral work *Rissolty Rossolty*) was profoundly disappointing. At a meeting of the biannual Feminist Theory and Music conference, held in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 1997, Mike Seeger was asked to respond to an audience member's comment that Crawford's gifts as a twentieth-century composer went to waste when she took on the work of transcribing, arranging, and publishing collections of songs for children. He remarked that the tragedy was not that his mother stopped composing, but that she died of cancer at the age of fifty-two, just after Peggy left home to attend Radcliffe College and Ruth sought to return to the world of modernist music. This exchange underscores the point that in some quarters, the extraordinary work of Ruth Crawford the composer is unfortunately still held in higher regard than the equally significant work of Ruth Crawford Seeger the folk music activist.

One central observation that emerges in several of Crawford Seeger's writings concerns the unfinished character of American traditional music. At the Mid-century International Folklore Conference held at Indiana University in 1950, she noted: "I was impressed . . . with certain values in this music [songs she edited for the Lomaxes' *Our Singing Country*] which . . . should be got, somehow, to children. Here were things that weren't just beautiful melodies – a sort of unfinishedness in the music, it kept on going. Professional music isn't like that; it always tells you when it is going to end."¹⁹

"Turtle Dove," a song she included in both *Nineteen American Folk Songs* and *American Folk Songs for Children* – with a different setting in each collection – illustrates this quality of "unfinishedness."

TURTLE DOVE

Quiet

Poor lit - tle tur - tle dove, Sit - ting on a
very smooth

pine, Mourn - ing for its own true love, And

why not me for mine, for mine, And why not me for

mine?
mine?
rit. molto

Source: Ruth Crawford Seeger, "Turtle Dove," from *Nineteen American Folk Songs* (1936 - 1938; New York: G. Schirmer, 1995).

The rocking left hand in the *Nineteen American Folk Songs* version (Example 1) plays steady eighth notes throughout the song, pausing on a longer rhythmic value, the final eighth note tied to a quarter note, only at the very end. Crawford's decision to conclude the song on C and G, a perfect fifth, in the second ending makes it sound unfinished, as if it could resume with another verse.²⁰

Crawford's emphasis on the unfinished quality in American traditional music, the result of singers who "keep the song going," returns repeatedly in her writings. Her insights into traditional song and working with children can be mined from her preface to *Nineteen American Folk Songs*; from the introductions to her volumes *American Folk Songs for Children* and *Animal Folk Songs for Children*; and from the monograph she prepared for publication in 1941 as the music editor's introduction for *Our Singing Country*, which was not published until sixty years later as *The Music of American Folk Song*.²¹ This important document serves as a treatise on the process of transcribing the songs from phonographic recordings, while also providing a rigorous discussion of numerous musical matters including rhythm and meter, dynamics, tempo, and singing style. In *The Music of American Folk Song*, she observes: "It has been noted . . . that most singers . . . continue from stanza to stanza with little (and, in some cases, with no) break in the flow of the song as a whole."²² In the introduction to *American Folk Songs for Children*, she remarks: "Keep-going-ness is one of the notable characteristics in traditional performance of music like this. Do not hesitate . . . to keep the music going through many repetitions. . . . Do not fear monotony: it is a valuable quality."²³ And in her text "Pre-School Children and American Folk Songs," she muses: "The traditional (folk) singer keeps his song

going without interruption of the pulse at stanza ends. . . . Neither the rhythm nor the mood of the song are broken into by artificial pauses, breaks, ritards, or 'expression.' This is straightforward music."²⁴

She makes the related observation that a song should stick to a single dramatic mood throughout, avoiding dramatization as one would hear in "the conventional style of fine-art performance": "The singer does not try to make the song mean more, or less, than it does. . . . The tune makes no compromises, is no slower nor faster, no softer nor louder. There is no climax – the song 'just stops.'"²⁵ In remarking upon these differences between the performance of "art song" and folk song, Crawford Seeger does not privilege one over the other or suggest any sort of hierarchy between the two; she simply establishes the different conventions of the styles of performance, emphasizing the importance of keeping them distinct.²⁶

As revealed by the hundreds of transcriptions from aluminum field recordings she prepared for John and Alan Lomax (many of which remain unpublished) and her own arrangements of traditional American songs, Crawford's immersion as a composer in New York's modernist crucible influenced her post-1935 work in traditional music. Crawford's modernist ear informs her striking choices of harmony, melody, and form in many of her arrangements, and her devotion to the smallest detail in her transcription work can be linked to her precise compositional methods.²⁷

Crawford Seeger's writings as well as her music reveal a modernist sensibility applied to an unexpected body of music.²⁸ Her introduction to *American Folk Songs for Children* notes the inclusion of songs with a wide range and "unusual intervals," asserting: "Children sometimes catch easily intervals and rhythms which to us seem

strange or difficult.”²⁹ In her foreword to *Nineteen American Folk Songs*, she writes that she wishes “to present this music in an idiom that savors, as much as possible, the contemporary . . . accustoming the student’s ear to a freer use of contemporary music.”³⁰ One of the most appealing aspects of this volume is that the arrangements embrace intervals (seconds, sevenths, fourths, and fifths) that composers and arrangers often shy away from in music for children.³¹ For example, as shown in the score above, measures four to five in “Turtle Dove” present two sevenths – one major seventh, one minor seventh – in the left hand’s stretch across the barline from G up to F-sharp, landing on the F-sharp-E dyad on the downbeat of measure five.³² The version of “What’ll We Do with the Baby?” in *American Folk Songs for Children* studiously avoids the baldly stated tonic triad in its harmonic setting, beginning each statement of the question in the song’s title with a perfect fifth, F to C, and closing the song with F in the bass and D moving stepwise to C in the middle voice to again sound the open perfect fifth. In setting “Sweet Betsy from Pike” in *Nineteen American Folk Songs*, Crawford Seeger writes a jaunty left hand part that hops back and forth to the low tonic F with a mostly descending line in the middle voice. Interval successions – such as in measures three to four, the diminished fifth B-natural to F followed by an octave F to F on the words “from Pike” – and cross relations – such as in measure five between A-flat and A-natural at the words “crossed the” – all occur over a rhythmic tug between the melody, in triple meter, and the bass, written in triple meter but organized in duple.³³

Crawford Seeger’s conviction that children should be given a taste of the contemporary by being fed the less sweet intervals may correspond with her decision to sing to her children songs with

lyrics about violence, death, and murder.³⁴ Peggy and Mike recall that both of their parents sang “very old, very violent murder ballads . . . in full” to them. Crawford Seeger firmly believed that children should be given “the real or the authentic or the old or the original.”³⁵ “The Babes in the Woods,” included in *Nineteen American Folk Songs*, narrates a tale of “pretty little babes / Did wander up and down” who “never more did see that man approaching”; the song ends with their death “in each other’s arms.” Her acceptance of what she identified as “ugliness” of tone quality and her unflinching use of dissonant intervals reveal a striking openness to a world of sounds, paralleling her openness to the texts she shared with her children.³⁶

Although Pete did not live with Ruth and Charles, he was close to his father’s second family. Peggy speaks with special fondness of visits by “beloved Pete,” recalling:

our tall exotic half-brother, with his long, long-necked banjo and his big, big feet stamping at the end of his long, long legs. Dio [Ruth] said Pete was better for us than our teachers, and she kept us home from school whenever he turned up. He’d sit and talk and sing and we’d stay up late and toast marshmallows and bawl out the choruses and try and lay our hands over the strings and detune the pegs while he played. . . . Dio transcribed songs from disc and notated them onto staff paper – we children couldn’t help but listen and osmose the music. . . . We’d always sung as a family, but when Mike and I learned folk banjo and guitar, the singsongs became weekly events.³⁷

Pete and Ruth’s relationship is illustrated further in a transcript of interviews by David King Dunaway with Pete Seeger in preparation for the manuscript that would eventually be published as the

book *How Can I Keep from Singing*.³⁸ Dunaway asks, “Do you feel that [Ruth] influenced you a great deal in your children’s songs?”

Pete Seeger: In a way, yes. I put that record [*American Folksongs for Children*] right out of her book. Moe Asch said, Pete, I want you to put out some children’s records, could you do it? I said my stepmother has just brought out a whole book, why don’t we take it right out of the book? And so, I put out *American Folksongs for Children*, just by leafing through her book.

David Dunaway: Did that material go into your repertoire?

Seeger: Some of them, yes.

Dunaway: Charles thinks that in some ways, it was the other way around; that you had already developed a performing style, certainly by the 1950s, that was so audience inclusive and so facile for children, that Ruth herself got some [ideas for projects].

Seeger: That’s interesting. I may have influenced her, yes, I suppose I did influence her. She admired some of the things I did. But I sure admired what she was doing.³⁹

Dunaway and Seeger’s exchange illustrates the back-and-forth flow of influence between Ruth and Pete. The relationship between influencer and influenced is not necessarily unidirectional from older to younger, teacher to student, or male to female, as some have assumed in the case of Charles and Ruth.⁴⁰

In her review of John A. Work’s *American Negro Songs for Mixed Voices*, Ruth muses on the role of the musician-transcriber and how music is passed along:

It has seemed to me for some time that claims for preponderance of white origin in Negro spiritual music have laid too great weight on the importance of tonal skeleton

and the written source, and too little on the rhythmic and tonal flesh in which the skeleton is clothed by the rich and varied singing style of this oral tradition. Also given too little consideration is the fact that in any creative process, either in fine art or folk music, the utilization of materials already current in the tradition is to be taken for granted; that any live tradition, fine art or folk, lives by means of a process such as Mr. Work terms “re-assembling” (I prefer “re-composing”); and that as Mr. Work points out there is a big difference between this process and “imitation.”⁴¹

Ruth’s view of folk music, articulated in her review of Work’s volume as a living, transformable tradition that is “re-composed” from musician to musician, is one shared by Peggy, who writes in the preface to *The Folk Songs of Peggy Seeger* that “the singer is but one link in the chain, and if this is a book of ‘my’ songs, that means that this is the way one singer has treated the common heritage before handing it on. It is my way of adding a bit of the present to what the past has left. In this sense they are ‘my’ songs for a while, but our songs all the time.”⁴² Thus, while Ruth undoubtedly had a distinct influence on Pete’s performance of songs for children, she should be considered a link in the chain of re-composition rather than the songs’ originator.

“Soldier’s Farewell,” a song from a live concert at Queen Elizabeth Hall in London to celebrate Peggy’s seventieth birthday, captures several of the Seeger children’s musical qualities that might have emerged from their mother’s approach to traditional music: Mike’s calm, unhurried manner of musicianship (once while playing the banjo at a performance in Harvard’s Paine Hall around 1989, he said that his father told him not to play too fast, or “people would think you’re trying

to show off”) and Peggy’s singing, powerful yet simple, affective though unsentimental.⁴³ Ruth had a profound influence on Peggy, who recalls: “My mother, Ruth Crawford, was . . . a fiery, creative woman. . . . She was an avant-garde composer but her mind was open to music of any kind. . . . Two traditions were ever-present and interlaced throughout my childhood: the formal and the traditional. They presented me with a vision of music that is wide and elastic.”⁴⁴

In his review “Springsteen’s Seegerless Seeger Tribute,” Joe Heim notes that the album *We Shall Overcome* does not contain “an actual Seeger song.”⁴⁵ By an “actual Seeger song,” Heim means one

written by Pete Seeger as opposed to the many he helped popularize. Heim could have also mentioned the failure to acknowledge Ruth’s scrupulous efforts in transcribing and publishing the songs, which made them readily available to Pete and, in turn, to Springsteen. Although singers, transcribers, and arrangers may be links in the chain, the substantial work they do in forging those links should be remembered.⁴⁶ Recognizing Ruth Crawford Seeger’s tremendous efforts in support of this thriving body of music will contribute to a more just record of American music and of women’s history, one that embraces the wide and elastic vision of music she herself encouraged.

ENDNOTES

Author’s Note: A hearty thanks to Todd Harvey at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress for his expert assistance; the students who took my seminars at Brooklyn College and Columbia University on Ruth Crawford Seeger – especially Beau Bothwell, Louise Chernosky, Penny Mealing, Theresa Rosas, and Kate Soper – for their excellent work on RCS; and to Anton Vishio for generously providing time to write. I am ever grateful to Judith Tick, whose work on Ruth Crawford Seeger continues to inspire my own. This essay is dedicated to Hana and Liam, whose delight in songs, instruments, repetition, and sounds is a daily inspiration.

¹ Liner notes to Bruce Springsteen, *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions* (Columbia Records, 2006). The “’97 session” that he refers to resulted in a tribute album to Pete Seeger to which Springsteen contributed “We Shall Overcome,” a song Martin Luther King, Jr., first heard in 1957 sung by Pete Seeger, who learned it in 1946 from Zilphia Horton, who herself had learned it from striking tobacco workers who visited the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. See John W. Barry, “Seeger Introduced King to ‘We Shall Overcome’ in 1957,” *Poughkeepsie Journal*, January 31, 2011; and “We Shall Overcome: An Hour with Legendary Folk Singer and Activist Pete Seeger,” *Democracy Now!*, September 4, 2006, http://www.democracynow.org/2006/9/4/we_shall_overcome_an_hour_with. Springsteen and Seeger together performed Woody Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land,” along with Seeger’s grandson Tao Rodríguez-Seeger, at President Obama’s first inauguration in January 2009.

² Pete Seeger, “Froggie Went a-Courtin’,” *American Folksongs for Children* (FTS 31501/FC 7601, 1955), reissued on CD as *American Folk, Game, and Activity Songs for Children* (Smithsonian Folkways 45056, 2000); Seeger, “John Henry,” *American Ballads* (Folkways 2319, 1957); Seeger, “Erie Canal,” *Yankee Doodle and Other Songs* (Young People’s Records 9008/Children’s Record Guild 9008, 1954 or 1955); Seeger, “Buffalo Gals” and “Old Dan Tucker,” *American Favorite Ballads, vol. 1* (FA 2320, 1957), rereleased as part of series SFW 40150. Other albums containing Pete Seeger’s recordings of songs from Crawford Seeger’s songbooks include *Songs to Grow On, vol. 2: School Days* (Folkways FC 7020, 1950); *Birds, Beasts, Bugs & Little Fishes* (Folkways 7610, 1955), reissued on CD as *Birds, Beasts, Bugs, and Fishes (Little and Big)* (Smithsonian Folkways 9628, 1998); and *Birds, Beasts, Bugs, and Bigger Fishes* (Folkways FW 7611, 1955), rereleased as SFW 45022, 1991 and on CD as SFW 45035, 1998. For a listing

of songs recorded by Pete Seeger, see David King Dunaway, *A Pete Seeger Discography: Seventy Years of Recordings* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2011).

³ *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions* won a Grammy for Best Traditional Folk Album in 2006, and had sold more than 700,000 copies as of 2009. See Ethan Smith, "Born to Run – and Promote," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 16, 2009. Seeger cites one of Crawford Seeger's songbooks in his 1993 memoir: "Of course you can put into a song the name of the child you are singing it to. My stepmother, Ruth Crawford Seeger, gave me the idea to do this when she put out the book *American Folksongs for Children* in 1949." See Pete Seeger, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone: A Singalong Memoir*, ed. Peter Blood, Michael Miller, and Sarah A. Elisabeth, 2nd ed. (1993; Bethlehem, Pa.: Sing Out Corporation, 2009), 49. Ruth Crawford Seeger's songbooks for children are *American Folk Songs for Children in Home, School, and Nursery School: A Book for Children, Parents, and Teachers* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1948); *Animal Folk Songs for Children: Traditional American Songs* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1950); and *American Folk Songs for Christmas* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1953). She also published a volume of traditional music arranged for piano, *Nineteen American Folk Songs for Piano* (1936–1938; New York: G. Schirmer, 1995).

⁴ "Froggie Went a-Courtin'" appears as "Frog Went A-Courtin'" in *American Folk Songs for Children* and *Nineteen American Folk Songs*; "John Henry" and "Buffalo Gals" (as "Buffalo Girls") appear in *American Folk Songs for Children*; and "Old Dan Tucker" and "Shenandoah" appear in *Folk Song U.S.A.: The 111 Best American Ballads*, ed. John A. and Alan Lomax (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1947) for which both Ruth and Charles Seeger prepared the settings for voice and piano. Peggy Seeger shared her observation in my graduate seminar "Ruth Crawford Seeger: Modernism and Tradition in 20th-Century Music," Columbia University, March 20, 2007. Even the news program *Democracy Now!*, which has admirably focused on stories not told in mainstream media, refers to Springsteen's *The Seeger Sessions* as an album that "features a collection of songs that were once performed by Seeger," but does not mention Ruth Crawford Seeger's work on the songs. See "We Shall Overcome," *Democracy Now!*

⁵ In this essay, I generally refer to Ruth Crawford Seeger as "Crawford" in the context of her modernist compositions, "Crawford Seeger" in the context of her work on American traditional music, and "Ruth" in relation to her family. Here and in the literature, she is at times also represented simply by RCS.

⁶ Andy Greene, "Pete Seeger: I Feel Optimistic," *Rolling Stone*, February 27, 2008.

⁷ Judith Tick's magnificent biography is a foundational study in Crawford Seeger scholarship. See Judith Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer's Search for American Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). See also Joseph N. Straus, *The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Ellie M. Hisama, *Gendering Musical Modernism: The Music of Ruth Crawford, Marion Bauer, and Miriam Gideon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and *Ruth Crawford Seeger's Worlds: Innovation and Tradition in Twentieth-Century American Music*, ed. Ray Allen and Ellie M. Hisama (Rochester, N.Y.: Rochester University Press, 2007). Despite the scholarship about Crawford Seeger, she is still sometimes represented as standing in the shadow of her husband, Charles Seeger. For example, William G. Roy's recent book on American folk music's relationship with social movements and race relations focuses on two father-son pairings in the chapter "Movement Entrepreneurs and Activists: John and Alan Lomax, and Charles and Pete Seeger." In a footnote, Roy mentions Ruth Crawford Seeger's early work with Carl Sandburg after a puzzling reference to Charles's first wife and Pete's mother, Constance Edson Seeger (who was a classical violinist but not a performer of traditional music); he does not mention Ruth's songbooks or work as the music editor of the monumental volume *Our Singing Country: Folk Songs and Ballads*, collected and compiled by John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax (1941; Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2000). See William G. Roy, *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), 259 n.11.

⁸ Pete Seeger's 1953 album *American Folksongs for Children* recorded a number of Crawford Seeger's arrangements and included copious citations from her book. She did not give per-

- mission for the citations or receive any royalties, despite her initial discussions with Moe Asch, the head of Folkways Records, about the idea of Pete's recording such an album. See Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger*, 345. Songs such as "Eency Weency Spider" (also now commonly known as "Itsy Bitsy Spider") from *American Folk Songs for Children* are widely circulated, sung in preschools, and used with children's toys such as on the ExerSaucer Triple Fun, a popular activity center in which pre-toddlers press, bat, and swat objects to activate melodies from a central bouncy seat. Aaron Copland used "Bonyparte" from *Our Singing Country* in his 1942 ballet suite *Rodeo*; see Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger*, 272.
- ⁹ Writings by Karen Cardullo, Larry Polansky, and Judith Tick have brought much needed scholarly attention to Crawford Seeger's work in traditional music. See Karen Cardullo, "Ruth Crawford Seeger: Preserver of American Folk Music," master's thesis, George Washington University, 1980; Larry Polansky's introduction to Ruth Crawford Seeger, *The Music of American Folk Song* (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2001), xxxi – lii; Judith Tick, "Rediscovering Our Singing Country," introduction to *Our Singing Country*, xiii – xviii; Tick, "Ruth Crawford, Charles Seeger, and 'The Music of American Folk Songs,'" in *Understanding Charles Seeger*, ed. Bell Yung and Helen Rees (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 109 – 129; Tick, "Historical Introduction: The Salvation of Writing Things Down," in Crawford Seeger, *The Music of American Folk Song*, xxi – xxix; and Tick, "Ruth Crawford Seeger, Modernist Composer in the Folk Revival: Biography as Music History," AMS/Library of Congress Lecture Series (Spring 2008), <http://www.ams-net.org/LC-lectures/seeger-tick.php>. Roberta Lamb's essay on Crawford Seeger's teaching and songbooks is a valuable contribution to studies of RCS as an educator. See Roberta Lamb, "Composing and Teaching as Dissonant Counterpoint," in *Ruth Crawford Seeger's Worlds*, ed. Allen and Hisama, 169 – 195.
- ¹⁰ Bess Lomax Hawes, *Sing It Pretty: A Memoir* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 25.
- ¹¹ Liner notes to Peggy and Michael Seeger, *American Folksongs for Children* (Rounder Kids CD 8001, 1996).
- ¹² Hawes, *Sing It Pretty*, 26.
- ¹³ Ruth Crawford Seeger, "The Use of Folklore for Nursery Schools," transcribed comments made at panel at the Folklore Institute of America, Indiana University, June 19 – August 16, 1946, as quoted in Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger*, 286.
- ¹⁴ A summary of Crawford Seeger's life and music appears in Ellie M. Hisama, "Ruth (Porter) Crawford (Seeger)," *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). For additional information about Crawford Seeger's books, music, and life, see Peggy Seeger's website, <http://www.peggyseeger.com/ruth-crawford-seeger>.
- ¹⁵ For a discussion of musical ultra-modernism, see Carol J. Oja, *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- ¹⁶ Ruth Crawford, "Letter to Miss Prink," September 30, 1940, excerpts in Matilda Gaume, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: Memoirs, Memories, Music* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1986), 210.
- ¹⁷ For an examination of Crawford's trajectory in music history "from nobody to genius," see Judith Tick, "Writing the Music of Ruth Crawford into Mainstream Music History," in *Ruth Crawford Seeger's Worlds*, ed. Allen and Hisama, 11 – 32. A score of the third movement of Crawford's *String Quartet 1931* is included in Charles Burkhart with William Rothstein, *Anthology for Musical Analysis: Postmodern Update*, 7th ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Thomson/Schirmer, 2012); and a score of the fourth movement is published in J. Peter Burkholder and Claude V. Palisca, *Norton Recorded Anthology of Western Music*, vol. 3, 6th ed., 2009 (CD-ROM).
- ¹⁸ Robert Sullivan, "Romper Rock," *The New York Times Magazine*, July 22, 2001.
- ¹⁹ Stith Thompson, ed., *Four Symposia on Folklore Held at the Midcentury International Folklore Conference, Indiana University, July 21 – August 4, 1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,

The Ruth Crawford Seeger Sessions 1953), 192. See also Ruth Crawford Seeger, “Keep the Song Going!” in *The Music of American Folk Song*, 137–144.

²⁰ Pete Seeger recorded a version of “Turtle Dove” on *Birds, Beasts, Bugs, and Bigger Fishes*.

²¹ Crawford Seeger, *The Music of American Folk Song*.

²² *Ibid.*, 63.

²³ Crawford Seeger, *American Folk Songs for Children*, 35.

²⁴ Ruth Crawford Seeger, “Pre-School Children and American Folk Songs,” in *The Music of American Folk Song*, 134.

²⁵ Crawford Seeger, *The Music of American Folk Song*, 32–33.

²⁶ Editor Larry Polansky comments that what RCS identified as “folk music’s lack of ‘drama,’ or ‘artifice,’ also characterizes the compositional aesthetic that RCS helped to develop,” and he writes that her *Piano Study in Mixed Accents* “‘just stops’ when its formal trajectory is complete.” See Crawford Seeger, *The Music of American Folk Song*, 89 n.xli. To my ears, the *Piano Study* contains a precise drama knitted into its pitches and form, and its conclusion occurs at a non-negotiable moment at which it *must* cease in order to reach the endpoint of a process set in motion by the compositional motor. For an analysis of *Piano Study in Mixed Accents*, see Lyn Ellen Thornblad Burkett, “Linear Aggregates and Proportional Design in Ruth Crawford’s *Piano Study in Mixed Accents*,” in *Ruth Crawford Seeger’s Worlds*, ed. Allen and Hisama, 57–72.

²⁷ The impact of Crawford’s subjectivity as a modernist on her work in folk music deserves a full-fledged study. Roberta Lamb reads the principles of Crawford Seeger’s work in transcription in relation to the compositional credo she wrote at Edgard Varèse’s request for a class he was teaching at Columbia University in 1948. See Lamb, “Composing and Teaching as Dissonant Counterpoint.”

²⁸ Ruth did not bring modernist music into the Seeger household, however, until the last years of her life. Her children heard her regularly play pieces by Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, and Schumann on the piano, but the avant-garde music that had been very much a part of her existence up to the early 1930s was not part of the music making of the Seeger household until the early 1950s, when Peggy heard her mother “start . . . playing something totally new. I wasn’t sure I liked it.” Peggy Seeger, “About Dio,” *ISAM Newsletter: Ruth Crawford Seeger Festival Booklet XXXI* (1) (Fall 2001).

²⁹ Crawford Seeger, *American Folk Songs for Children*, 26.

³⁰ Crawford Seeger, *Nineteen American Folk Songs for Piano*, foreword.

³¹ Peggy Seeger aptly characterizes the seconds and sevenths as “uneasy,” the fifths and fourths as “stark,” and the thirds, sixths, and triads as “sweet, full” in her perceptive remarks on the arrangements; see *ibid.*

³² *American Folk Songs for Children* contains a simpler setting of “Turtle Dove” (in F major instead of in G) that slows the rocking left-hand motion to a quarter-note pulse instead of eighth notes and uses a sixth to set the syllable “Mourn-.” See Crawford Seeger, *American Folk Songs for Children*, 179.

³³ I do not know whether Crawford would have used the term “cross-relation” (sometimes known as “false relation”) to refer to the clash that occurs between A-flat and A-natural at the words “crossed the.”

³⁴ Liner notes to Peggy and Michael Seeger, *American Folk Songs for Children*. Crawford Seeger excluded some verses in the published songbooks; Peggy and Mike propose that this exclusion may have resulted from her uncertainty as to what would be “acceptable” for other people’s children.

³⁵ Thompson, ed., *Four Symposia*, 191.

- 36 “I think we should remember that ugliness is also a very beautiful thing. . . . I like what some people call ugliness of tone quality in some singers.” Ibid., 243. Judith Tick links Crawford’s comments on ugliness to “the empathy of a modernist”; Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger*, 326. Ellie M.
Hisama
- 37 Peggy Seeger, *The Peggy Seeger Songbook: Warts and All, Forty Years of Songmaking* (New York: Music Sales Corporation, 1998), 8.
- 38 David King Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing: Pete Seeger* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981). The book was reprinted in slightly different form (with corrections by Seeger) as David King Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing?: The Ballad of Pete Seeger* (New York: Villard, 2008). For a first-person account of Pete Seeger’s life and views, see Pete Seeger, *Pete Seeger: In His Own Words*, ed. Rob Rosenthal and Sam Rosenthal (Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm Publishers, 2012).
- 39 Transcripts from *David Dunaway Collection of Interviews with Pete Seeger and Contemporaries*, AFC 2000/019 (Washington, D.C.: Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress). I am grateful to Todd Harvey at the American Folklife Center for his assistance with these materials.
- 40 For a discussion about the process of influence between Charles and Ruth Seeger, see Tick, “Ruth Crawford, Charles Seeger, and the Music of American Folk Songs.”
- 41 Ruth Crawford Seeger, “[Review of] John N. Work. Composer and Arranger, *American Negro Songs for Mixed Voices*,” *Notes: Quarterly Journal of the Music Library Association* 6 (1) (December 1948); reprinted in *The Music of American Folk Songs*, 144 – 145.
- 42 Peggy Seeger, *Folk Songs of Peggy Seeger* (New York: Oak Publications, 1964).
- 43 Peggy Seeger, *Three Score and Ten: 70th Birthday Celebration Live at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London* (Applesseed Records 1100, 2006).
- 44 Peggy Seeger, *The Peggy Seeger Songbook*, 7, 14. Also see Lydia Hamessley, “Peggy Seeger: From Traditional Folksinger to Contemporary Songwriter,” in *Ruth Crawford Seeger’s Worlds*, ed. Allen and Hisama, 252 – 288. Charles’s immersion in folk music and his paternity of Pete, Mike, and Peggy provide a fascinating foil to the dismissive remarks about folk music he had made years earlier. In a *Daily Worker* column published under the pseudonym Carl Sands, Seeger called folk song “conventional, easy-going, subservient”; see Carl Sands [Charles Seeger], “Thirteen Songs from Eight Countries Included in Book Put Out by Music Bureau Internat’l,” *Daily Worker*, February 1, 1935.
- 45 Joe Heim, “Springsteen’s Seegerless Seeger Tribute,” *The Washington Post*, April 26, 2006.
- 46 For example, Crawford Seeger credits Fletcher Collins, Jr., for “Ency Weency Spider” and “What Shall We Do When We All Go Out?” – published in Fletcher Collins, Jr., *Alamance Play Party Songs and Singing Games* (Elon, N.C.: Elon College, 1940) – in Crawford Seeger, *American Folk Songs for Children*, 4. By contrast, “What Shall We Do When We All Go Out?” appears under the title of “We All Go Out To Play” and is identified simply as a “Traditional Children’s Song” in *Ladybug: The Magazine for Young Children*, July/August 2013, 8 – 9.

“The Way I Would Feel About San Quentin”: Johnny Cash & the Politics of Country Music

Daniel Geary

Abstract: Johnny Cash’s live prison albums, “At Folsom Prison” and “At San Quentin,” are significant and under-recognized social statements of the 1960s. Cash encouraged his listeners to empathize with prisoners by performing songs with prison themes and by recording the electric reactions of inmates to his music. Cash performed before a multiracial audience, and his music was popular with the counterculture as well as with traditional country fans. Cash’s albums and his prison reform activism rejected the law-and-order policies of conservative politicians who sought to enlist country music in their cause. An examination of Cash’s prison records challenges the commonly held notion that country music provided the soundtrack for the white conservative backlash of the late 1960s.

We don’t smoke marijuana in Muskogee
We don’t take our trips on LSD
We don’t burn our draft cards
 down on Main Street
We like livin’ right and bein’ free.
– Merle Haggard, “Okie from Muskogee”

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Country musician Merle Haggard’s 1969 hit “Okie from Muskogee” became an anthem of conservative backlash. The song contrasted the traditional values of the American heartland with psychedelic drug use, anti-Vietnam War protests, sexual liberation, hippie fashion, and campus unrest. Songs about “Okies,” whites who had migrated to California from Oklahoma and nearby states during the Dust Bowl, had once been associated with left-wing folk singers such as Woody Guthrie. But when Haggard sang, “I’m proud to be an Okie from Muskogee,” he tied pride in white working-class identity to conservative attacks on the counterculture and the New Left in a way that resonated with the political messages of George Wallace, Ronald

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Reagan, and Richard Nixon. In live performances, Haggard's enthusiastic audiences waved American flags.¹

Politicians and critics at the time viewed country as the musical language of a white working class that was once a solid contingent of the New Deal Democratic coalition, but that defected in large numbers to the Republican Party beginning in the 1960s. However, while many New Right politicians sought to capitalize on the popularity of country music, the genre was not inherently conservative. The most popular country records of the late 1960s challenged backlash politics. Johnny Cash's classic live prison recordings, *At Folsom Prison* (1968) and *At San Quentin* (1969), rejected conservative calls for "law and order."

We typically remember popular music of the 1960s for its overt social messages; yet Cash's prison albums have too often been neglected as major political statements of the time. *At Folsom Prison* and *At San Quentin* suggest that country music could express populist resistance to New Right politics that drew on a different conception of white Southern identity. Like other genres of popular music, country was politically diverse. Even "Okie from Muskogee" was more complicated than it seemed. Many fans may have interpreted it as supportive of conservative backlash, but Haggard meant his song to be tongue-in-cheek. "Okie" satirically contrasted hippie drug use to Muskogee residents' consumption of "white lightning," illegal high-proof liquor. Its spare instrumentation was atypical of Haggard's blues-inspired sound, and its lyrics were clearly over-the-top.

Many Americans associate 1960s popular music with rock-and-roll artists such as Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin, and Jimi Hendrix. Yet the decade also saw tremendous growth in the popularity of country music.

Until the late 1940s, the United States had no full-time country music station, but by 1967, at least 238 stations played country full-time, and more than 2,000 stations played some country. Sometimes called "country and western," the genre had national appeal. But it also had a distinctive regional character, identified with the South and Southwest. Its main institutional centers were Nashville, Tennessee, and Bakersfield and Los Angeles in Southern California.²

The growing popularity of a musical genre identified with the South indicated the increasing importance of this region in American culture and politics. Some scholars have connected the "southernization" of American culture to the growth of a New Right that successfully fused populist opposition to liberal elites with militaristic patriotism, evangelical Christianity, and backlash against 1960s-era social movements. Historians examining the rise of the New Right in the 1960s often point to the growing influence of the region where country music was most popular: the Sunbelt, an area stretching from the former states of the Confederacy to Southern California. From 1964 to 2004, every elected U.S. president hailed from the Sunbelt. In the last few decades of the twentieth century, the low-wage, union-hostile economy of the region boomed while the Rust Belt decayed. Politically, the Sunbelt is often associated with strong patriotism, reinforced by the heavy presence of military bases; traditional social values, derived from evangelical Protestantism; and strong support for maintaining white supremacy.³

Historian Dan Carter, for example, traces the modern conservative movement to the 1964 and 1968 presidential campaigns of the former segregationist governor of Alabama, George Wallace. In his presidential bids, Wallace combined populist rhetoric against liberal elites and

unpatriotic antiwar protestors with coded racial appeals to win significant support among the white working class, not only in the South, but also in states such as Ohio, Michigan, and California. Wallace embodied the politics of backlash; when liberal protestors heckled him with obscenities, he responded: "I have two four-letter words you don't know: 'W-O-R-K' and 'S-O-A-P.'"⁴ Though Wallace failed to win the presidency, his rhetoric and tactics were imitated by Richard Nixon, whose famous "Southern strategy" ensured that previously solid Southern support for the Democratic Party shifted just as solidly to support for the Republican Party. Nixon claimed to speak for hard-working, patriotic Americans: a "silent majority" of the "forgotten Americans, the non-shouters, the non-demonstrators."⁵

New Right strategists and politicians sought to enlist country music in their struggle. In a syndicated 1971 news column, Kevin Phillips claimed country music for conservatism. "More and more people," he declared, "are evidently finding the 'straight' songs and lyrics of country music preferable to the tribal war dances, adolescent grunts, and marijuana hymns that have taken over so many pop stations." Phillips, a key architect of Nixon's Southern strategy, had coined the term "Sunbelt" in his influential 1969 book, *The Emerging Republican Majority*, which identified the region as a likely source of Republican gains. He claimed that Republican politicians such as Nixon could learn from country music how to capture the votes of disaffected working-class whites. Phillips declared country to be the music of "the forgotten Americans," the hard-working citizens who "drive the trucks, plow the farms, man the fields, and police the streets." Ignoring country music's African American roots, Phillips celebrated it as the "folk music of English-Irish-Scottish rural and small-town Amer-

ica." Conservative politicians, he contended, could appeal to white country fans indignant that liberal elites ignored their problems and who were "tired of hearing upper-crust talk about equal justice for blacks."⁶

New Right politicians sought to capitalize on the growing popularity of country music during the 1960s. Wallace solicited country musicians' endorsements, and country bands warmed up audiences at his campaign rallies. As governor of California, Reagan devoted a week of the state's calendar to "country and western music." Hoping to endear himself to "Okie from Muskogee" fans, Reagan officially pardoned Haggard for a crime for which he had earlier served time.⁷ Some of the country hits of the late 1960s expressed messages of conservative backlash. Following the success of "Okie," Haggard released "The Fightin' Side of Me" (1970), which attacked antiwar protestors as unpatriotic. Tammy Wynette's country and western tunes "Stand by Your Man" (1968) and "Don't Liberate Me (Love Me)" (1971) rejected feminist demands for gender equality. Guy Drake's "Welfare Cadillac" (1970) attacked liberal welfare programs, implying that they benefited poor African Americans at the expense of hard-working whites.

The growing popularity of country music did not always go hand-in-hand with the rise of the New Right. In fact, the most popular country albums of the late 1960s rejected the conservative politics of backlash. Johnny Cash's live recordings at two notorious California prisons, *At Folsom Prison* (1968) and *At San Quentin* (1969), both reached number one on the country music charts, the latter remaining there for twenty-two weeks. Both albums also had significant crossover appeal that reached the very countercul-

ture audience decried by advocates of conservative country. With 6.5 million records sold in 1969, the albums made Cash the best-selling musical artist in the world, eclipsing even the Beatles.⁸

Cash's records rebuked the conservative politics of "law and order," a slogan used by Wallace, Reagan, and Nixon to call for crackdowns on criminals and protestors. In a 1966 campaign speech, Reagan declared:

Let us have an end to the idea that society is responsible for each and every wrongdoer. We must return to a belief in every individual being responsible for his conduct and his misdeeds with punishment immediate and certain. With all our science and sophistication . . . the jungle still is waiting to take over. The man with the badge holds it back.⁹

As Cash rehearsed at a Sacramento hotel on the eve of his concert at the nearby Folsom Prison, he received a visit from Governor Reagan to wish him luck. However, Cash's lyrics clearly rejected Reagan's emphasis on tough punishment for lawbreakers. Cash's records cut against the politics of law and order by encouraging listeners to identify with men behind bars. His songs articulate what it would be like to be in prison, and the recorded reactions of inmates to Cash's performances literally gave them a voice on the albums.

A common misperception of Cash was that he had done hard time. In fact, he had spent only a few nights in jail. However, he had written songs about prisons from the beginning of his career. He wrote his famous "Folsom Prison Blues," released in 1956, years earlier while serving with the army in Germany; at that time, Cash had never stepped foot in Folsom, but he had recently seen a movie set in the prison. In 1957, just two years after Cash was signed by Sam Phillips at the

now-legendary Sun Studios in Memphis, he began to perform at prisons. In fact, Haggard attended a Cash concert while a prisoner at San Quentin in the late 1950s. For years, Cash tried to convince his record label, Columbia, to produce a live prison album. Finally, Columbia agreed to record *At Folsom Prison*, a Cash performance held in Dining Room 2 at Folsom Prison on January 13, 1968. After Folsom climbed the charts, Cash and Columbia followed with the 1969 release of the even more popular *At San Quentin*.¹⁰

The records' crossover success owed partly to Cash's musical style, which appealed to audiences who did not normally listen to country. His deep, gravelly voice, his hard-bitten persona, and the spare, monotonous "boom-chicka-boom" sound of his band, the Tennessee Three, created a grittier feel than the smoothly produced country-pop sound of Nashville and the Grand Ole Opry. Indeed, Cash's style was more similar to that of rougher-edged California country musicians such as Haggard. Cash's Memphis rockabilly roots brought him closer to rock 'n' roll than most country performers. On the prison records, Cash was backed not only by the Tennessee Three, but also by legendary early rocker Carl Perkins, who had first performed the iconic hit "Blue Suede Shoes" (1956).

In addition, Cash embraced folk music, unlike most country musicians. On his prison records, Cash performed traditional songs, featured June Carter and the Carter Family, and emphasized ballads and songs of social protest. Cash also maintained a public friendship with Bob Dylan (who co-wrote "Wanted Man" on *At San Quentin*). By performing prison-themed songs before an audience of inmates, Cash placed himself in a longer tradition of American roots music. Prison songs had a long history in American folk music, reflecting fascination and often sympathy with men

driven to crime by difficult economic circumstances and with outlaws who defied social convention. Prisons were also key sites of musical production in twentieth-century folk music. The pioneering folk musicologists Alan and John Lomax began recording prisoners at Southern penitentiaries in 1933. Most famously, they encountered Huddie Ledbetter at a Louisiana penitentiary and subsequently promoted his career as the folksinger “Lead Belly,” sometimes forcing him to perform in prison clothes.¹¹ While Cash’s prison records avoided the exploitative element of the Lomaxes’ work, they traded on this folk music tradition of viewing prisons as sites of musical and sociological authenticity.

Folsom is essentially a prison concept album. Its set list mixes Cash’s own compositions with traditional folk songs and combines songs with explicit prison themes with songs about the trials of labor and love, which take on new meaning in a prison context. Though the material for *San Quentin* more closely replicated Cash’s normal touring show, it included a healthy dose of prison-themed songs such as “San Quentin,” “Wanted Man,” and “Starkeville County Jail.” The excitement of both recordings lay less in the originality of the material than in the context of the live performance. Cash wanted *At Folsom Prison* to be “the kind of thing that has all the realism of a real prison – the clanging steel doors and other sounds inside the big walls.”¹² The records did not exactly reproduce Cash’s concerts; for example, producers altered the order of songs and drew material from separate performances held on the same date. Nevertheless, the albums demanded that listeners place themselves alongside the prisoners as an audience for Cash’s music. The records’ distinctive sound came not only from the live recording of Cash and his band, but also

from Cash’s banter with prisoners and – most of all – the enthusiastic responses of prisoners to songs intended to express their condition.

Cash’s dynamic rapport with his audience featured prominently in one of the second album’s few new songs, “San Quentin.” Cash introduced the song as his effort to articulate the experience of prisoners: “I was thinking about you guys yesterday. Now I’ve been here three times before and I think I understand a little bit about how you feel about some things. . . . I tried to put myself in your place and I believe that this is the way I would feel about San Quentin.” The inmates’ responses backed Cash’s claim to speak for California prisoners. When Cash sang the first line of the song, “San Quentin, you’ve been living hell to me,” the audience clapped, yelled, and whistled. The subsequent lines, “San Quentin, I hate every inch of you,” and “San Quentin, may you rot and burn in hell,” received even louder reactions. Songwriters often take the perspectives of others, but rarely are their imaginations so powerfully confirmed by the people their songs are about. Men behind California prison walls were a powerful collective presence on Cash’s records, reminding listeners that they were not just the conceit of a singer, but a very real part of American society.

By articulating the perspectives of prisoners, Cash recognized them as “forgotten Americans” who differed from the silent majority valorized by New Right politicians. Cash’s exclusive focus on *men* in prison dovetailed with the New Right discourse of the “forgotten American,” almost always imagined as a male, blue-collar worker. However, by combining his rebellious individuality and hard-bitten persona with empathy and sensitivity, Cash’s version of masculinity differed from conservative advocates of “hard

hat” politics. In contrast with law and order rhetoric that demonized prisoners, Cash’s records stressed the humanity of inmates and encouraged his listeners to empathize with them. Cash’s liner notes for the Folsom record referred to “the convicts – all brothers of mine.” Like New Right politicians, Cash used the language of populism, speaking in the name of the common man. Yet rather than attacking out-of-touch liberal elites, Cash targeted prison officials, the wealthy (“rich folks eating from a fancy dining car” torment the narrator of “Folsom Prison Blues”), and government officials who ignored prisoner welfare.

Cash tapped into a left-oriented Southern politics, with roots in late-nineteenth-century populism as well as in the New Deal, that reflected his own biography. At the end of the San Quentin concert, the concert announcer introduced the audience to Cash’s father, Ray Cash, described as a “badland farmer from Dyess, Arkansas.” Dyess was a New Deal resettlement community where the Cash family had relocated during the agricultural depression of the 1930s. Johnny Cash was always grateful for the assistance his family received, and he felt that the government should help those similarly in need.

The prison albums’ messages of shared humanity and personal redemption sprang in part from Cash’s evangelical Protestantism, a religious orientation more often associated with conservative politics. Cash insisted that prisoners deserved compassion even if they had made poor choices; he felt prisons should be places of rehabilitation rather than punishment. *At Folsom Prison* concludes with a gospel rendition of “Greystone Chapel,” written by inmate Glenn Sherley, that asserts the equal right of all men to God’s mercy: “the doors to the house of God are never locked.” Cash’s redemptive message jibed with his own widely publicized

(if embellished) personal story, which included drug abuse and exaggerated accounts of his prison record and which ended in rescue by the love of a good Christian woman, June Carter Cash.

When Cash pled for compassion and redemption for prisoners, he sharply criticized the New Right emphasis on imprisonment as a solution to social problems. The song “San Quentin” drove this point home, posing the question, “San Quentin, what good do you think you do?” and declaring, “Mr. Congressman, you can’t understand.” Cash’s advocacy of prison reform did not stop with his songs. He outspokenly supported efforts to clear up abuses, to improve the conditions of prisoners, and to reevaluate whether long-term confinement was the best method for rehabilitating prisoners. In 1972, Cash testified on these issues before the U.S. Congress, appearing before a Senate subcommittee with Glen Sherley, the Folsom prisoner who had written “Greystone Chapel,” and whose parole Cash had helped secure. Here, Cash connected himself to a broader prison reform movement that urged that prisons be sites of rehabilitation rather than retribution.

Cash’s prison albums also rejected New Right politics by reaching out to one of the targets of law and order rhetoric: the counterculture. Columbia Records actively promoted *At Folsom Prison* and *At San Quentin* in the underground press, where it received positive reviews from *Voice* and *Rolling Stone*. Both records appealed to a late-1960s rock audience that prized authenticity in its music, having rejected much of American mass culture as artificial. More important, Cash’s prison albums captured a broader masculine rebelliousness in American society, a rejection of authority evident among men who burned their draft cards or grew their hair long. Joking with his audi-

ence in Folsom, Cash remarked about the prison guards, “Mean bastards, ain’t they?” During his San Quentin concert, Cash was infamously photographed flashing his middle finger. The active cheers of the prison audience to Cash’s anti-authoritarian banter and lyrics added to the albums’ appeal, as its producers well understood. On the Folsom album, after the famous line “I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die,” producers spliced in a prisoner yelping with delight.¹³

Advocates of conservative country portrayed it as a genre that appealed to whites only, but Cash’s prison audiences were racially mixed. In his prison records and his public statements, Cash avoided explicit engagement with the racial politics that defined the 1960s. A writer for *The New York Times* charged, “Cash will not talk much of the contemporary poor, of civil rights and civil wrongs, of black people and *Chicanos*. Perhaps many of the down South country folk who buy his platters would rather not hear about those subjects.”¹⁴ The writer’s condescending depiction of country music fans and his assumption that only people of color made up the “contemporary poor” would have delighted populist conservatives on the lookout for liberal elitism. But the writer had a point in that Cash had never directly confronted racism against African Americans.

Nevertheless, Cash implicitly rejected the racial politics of white backlash, especially in his prison albums. His rock and roots influences more openly displayed their debt to African American musical traditions than did most country music. At Folsom and San Quentin, Cash performed before prisoners of all races. One scholar estimates that when Cash played San Quentin in 1969, 30 percent of prisoners were African American and 18 percent were Hispanic.¹⁵ Photographs of the

audience included with the LPs advertised this fact by showing faces of many colors.

Moreover, the prisons where Cash performed lay at the center of the late-1960s confrontation between law and order politics and the black power movement. San Quentin, located in Marin County, near the Black Panther Party headquarters in Oakland, was a particularly symbolic choice. A near race riot occurred at San Quentin in 1967, prevented only when guards fired upon the prisoners. That same year, the Black Panthers demanded “freedom for all black people in jail” in their ten-point program, claiming that all black inmates were political prisoners. Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver had been imprisoned at both Folsom and San Quentin, an experience he discussed in his best-selling 1967 memoir, *Soul on Ice*. In 1968, Panther Party founder Huey Newton was imprisoned in San Quentin, charged with voluntary manslaughter for killing a police officer.¹⁶

It was to Cash’s credit that he eschewed the radical California prison reform movement’s outlandish demand for the release of *all* prisoners and its delusion that prisoners were urban revolutionary guerrillas. However, unlike the Black Panthers, Cash failed to explicitly connect inhumane prison conditions to institutionalized racism. Nevertheless, if Cash’s populism emphasized class injustices at the expense of racial ones, it clearly rejected the racial backlash politics of the New Right. The conservative call for law and order was always in part a racially coded call for cracking down on African American radicalism and criminality. Cash’s emphasis on prisoners’ humanity extended to black and Chicano prisoners, as well as to white ones. The popularity of Cash’s prison records served as an inspiration for black blues artist B. B. King, who recorded a concert at a majority-

black Chicago penitentiary in 1970 (released in 1971 as *Live in Cook County Jail*) and became involved in prison reform activism, helping create the Foundation for the Advancement of Inmate Rehabilitation and Recreation.¹⁷ At least one member of Cash's prison audience even interpreted him as sympathetic to black radicalism. When Cash began playing "San Quentin" in the prison of the same name, an African American convict raised a clenched fist, the black power salute.¹⁸

The political significance of Cash's prison records has often been missed because Cash himself never hewed to a consistent ideology. Though Cash clearly rejected efforts to tie country music to conservative politics, he also disappointed liberals, particularly for his refusal to consistently criticize the Vietnam War. For example, when Cash performed at the Nixon White House in 1970, he encouraged patriotic Americans to rally behind the war effort, only to then confound Nixon officials by performing "What is Truth?" – a song that sympathized with antiwar youths. In recent

years, scholars have tried to comprehend the nuances and contradictions of Cash's political statements during the late 1960s. However, as historian Michael Foley has argued, Cash's political significance lay not in any particular ideological stance he adopted, but rather in his broader "politics of empathy" that allowed him to bond with and articulate the feelings of working-class Americans.¹⁹

This was dramatically true of *At Folsom Prison* and *At San Quentin*, when in empathizing with a multiracial group of forgotten Americans, Cash rebuked the New Right politics of conservative populism. Cash not only rejected the politics of law and order and its racial connotations, but also made common cause with counter-cultural rebels. His classic records remind us not to generalize about the politics of a musical genre and the social group and region it represents. Country music was never the monolithically conservative music that Republican leaders claimed it was. When Cash performed at the White House, he refused the request of a Nixon official that he play "Welfare Cadillac" and "Okie from Muskogee."²⁰

ENDNOTES

- 1 Peter La Chapelle, *Proud to be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
- 2 Bill C. Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 3rd rev. ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 267.
- 3 For a recent collection of essays that stresses the political and cultural diversity of the region, see Michelle Nickerson and Darren Dochuk, eds., *Sunbelt Rising: The Politics of Space, Place, and Region* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).
- 4 As quoted in Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 240.
- 5 Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).
- 6 Kevin P. Phillips, "Revolutionary Music," *The Washington Post*, May 6, 1971; and Kevin P. Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1969).
- 7 La Chapelle, *Proud to be an Okie*, 143.
- 8 Leigh H. Edwards, *Johnny Cash and the Paradox of American Identity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 20.

- ⁹ As quoted in Lou Cannon, *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2003), 216. Reagan's prison policies as governor, however, were considerably more moderate than his rhetoric.
- ¹⁰ The definitive account of the Folsom concert is Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison: The Making of a Masterpiece* (Cambridge, Mass.: De Capo, 2004). See also John Hayes, "Man of Sorrows in Folsom," *Radical History Review* 98 (2007): 119–135.
- ¹¹ Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 47–75.
- ¹² As quoted in George Carpozi, *Johnny Cash Story* (New York: Pyramid, 1970), 93.
- ¹³ Interestingly, the record company cut the line from the radio version of "Folsom Prison Blues" in the wake of Robert Kennedy's assassination, fearing that its violent overtones would alienate audiences. See Streissguth, *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison*, 89, 136–138.
- ¹⁴ Tom Dearmore, "First Angry Man of Country Music," *The New York Times*, September 21, 1969.
- ¹⁵ Jonathan Silverman, *Nine Choices: Johnny Cash and American Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 96.
- ¹⁶ See Eric Cummins, *The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Movement* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994). Newton's conviction was later overturned.
- ¹⁷ Ulrich Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties: A Story in Black and White* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 28.
- ¹⁸ Ralph J. Gleason, "Johnny Cash at San Quentin," *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 26, 1969.
- ¹⁹ Michael S. Foley, "A Politics of Empathy: Johnny Cash, the Vietnam War, and the 'Walking Contradiction' Myth Dismantled," *Popular Music and Society*, 2012, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2013.798928>.
- ²⁰ Nan Robertson, "Cash and Country Music Take White House Stage," *The New York Times*, April 18, 1970.

Hollywood as Music Museum & Patron: Bringing Various Musical Styles to a Wide Audience

Charlotte Greenspan

Abstract: The role of Hollywood films in holding up a mirror – albeit sometimes a distorted one – to the American public is indisputable. Less discussed is their role in bringing a wide range of music – popular, classical, jazz, avant-garde, ethnic – to an unsuspecting audience. Whether the music is in the foreground, as in biographical movies about composers, for example, or in the background supporting the narrative, watching a movie educates the viewers' ears. Indeed, the role of movies in widening the public's aural palate has parallels with the role of art museums in broadening the public's visual taste. To supply the music needed for movies, Hollywood studios have employed a large number of composers of the most varied backgrounds, taking on a significant function as patron of contemporary music. This essay briefly examines some of the varied interactions of movies, music, and the public.

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The Hollywood film industry plays a crucial role in the preservation and dissemination of music of many styles. This role is not much discussed, however, because it is an unintended side effect of most Hollywood films, the primary aim of which is commercial success. Nevertheless, despite differences in stated or inherent aims, and despite differences in financial structure, the effect that Hollywood studios have on the American public with regard to music is surprisingly similar to the effect the great museums have with regard to art.

The first two major art museums in the United States, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, opened their doors in the same year, 1870. From the outset, they were committed to the education, enlightenment, and one might say elevation of a democratic populace. In her study of American art museums, Nancy Einreinhofer recounts how during "the opening ceremony of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston's mayor described the city's museum as "The

crown of our educational system.”¹ Similarly, the 1876 Annual Report of the Metropolitan Museum declared, “The Museum today is not surpassed as an educational power among the people by any university, college, or seminary of learning in the metropolis.”²

The educational aim in bringing great works of art to the attention of large numbers of people was not primarily aesthetic – this was not art for art’s sake. Rather, it was believed that elevated taste led to elevated morals, and that a more educated populace produced a stronger democracy. The sheer pleasure arising from contact with works of art was not denied or eschewed, but it was not highlighted as a principal part of the mission of the museum.

In contrast, bringing pleasure, or at least entertainment, to the largest possible paying audience was very much the *raison d’être* for the first American moviemakers. Despite the slogan *ars gratia artis*, adopted by the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio in 1917, commerce rather than art or edification guided decisions about movies. The heads of studios wanted to make a product for profit, just as other moguls produced steel or built railroads. Yet over time, the power of movies to influence and educate could hardly be ignored.

The purported ability of movies to affect the consciousness, attitudes, and morals of their audiences has been much debated. For instance, the effect of violent movies and video games on people in possession of guns is just one aspect of this discussion that has received recent attention. My interest here is in one small corner of the debate: namely, the ability of movies to expose usually unsuspecting audiences to a wide range of musical styles.

Musical indoctrination through Hollywood films often began early in the life of a moviegoer. Many people claim to have

had their first contact with classical music while watching cartoons as children. In his book *Tunes for ’Toons: Music for the Hollywood Cartoon*, musicologist Daniel Goldmark notes:

If cartoons have become associated over time with any one musical genre, it is classical music. When I talk to people about cartoon music, that is inevitably what they first think of and talk about: “Cartoons are where I learned all the classics.” . . . With the increasingly limited attention given to classical music in primary and secondary schools, cartoon scores have managed to keep the classics in the public’s ears, albeit in a context that gives them an entirely different set of meanings.³

To be sure, the “classical music” that viewers are exposed to via cartoons is in fact only melodies or motives from larger pieces, fragments meant to capture a mood or semaphore a situation within seconds. The Wedding March from Wagner’s *Lohengrin*, the Funeral March from Chopin’s Piano Sonata No. 2, the Ride of the Valkyries from Wagner’s *Die Walküre*, the Overture to *William Tell* by Rossini, and many other works by Beethoven, Brahms, Schubert, Schumann, Liszt, and Tchaikovsky: all have been mined for nuggets of instant musical meaning. Of course, the extent to which exposure leads to appreciation remains an open question. Familiarity is not the same as knowledge; but surely unfamiliarity is the same as lack of knowledge.

Cartoons were also the entry point, for many innocent observers, into the world of jazz. According to Goldmark, cartoons “became an especially potent site for spreading the sound of jazz nationwide.”⁴ Jazz entered the feature-film sound track in the 1950s, partly to create an atmosphere of alternative morality. Alex North’s jazz-inflected score for *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), for example, underlines the hover-

ing sexuality as well as the New Orleans setting. *The Man with a Golden Arm* (1956; score by Elmer Bernstein) is set in Chicago and has as its hero a heroin-addicted jazz drummer. But cartoons featured jazz performances as early as the 1930s. Some of these cartoons suffer from their overt association of the sounds of jazz with racial stereotypes. Still, the musical performances themselves are notable.

Directors of museums were aware that while one can put works of art on view, there is no guarantee that the observer will be elevated. To address this issue, museums added staff members whose principal concern was the education of patrons. The Cleveland Museum of Art, a leader in this field, gives the director of these services the lofty title Curator of Education. Gallery talks and museum tours, public lectures and publications, classes in studio art and art history for both children and adults, and outreach programs to local schools are among the tactics that today's museums use to help the public understand their collections.

When and why the impulse to educate took hold of Hollywood film studios is more difficult to pinpoint. The Disney film *Fantasia* (1940), however, represents a decisive moment in the coming together of music, cartoons, and the educational urge. At a chance meeting in the West Hollywood restaurant Chasens, Walt Disney explained to conductor Leopold Stokowski his idea to use Paul Dukas's tone poem *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* as the basis for a film. Mickey Mouse, Disney's first star, would be featured as the apprentice in an effort to expand the character's dramatic range. Stokowski was enthusiastic, offering his services as conductor and suggesting that *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* be just one part of a more extensive work combining animation and classical music. Deems Taylor, a noted commentator on classical

music, was brought in to help select the pieces. In its finished form, *Fantasia* ran two hours and comprised eight musical segments: the *Toccata and Fugue in D minor* by J. S. Bach, transcribed for orchestra; excerpts from *The Nutcracker Suite* by Tchaikovsky; *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* by Dukas; *The Rite of Spring* by Stravinsky; Symphony No. 6 (the "Pastoral") by Beethoven; *Dance of the Hours* by Ponchielli; *Night on Bald Mountain* by Mussorgsky; and Franz Schubert's "Ave Maria."

The aspirations of Disney and Stokowski were related, though not identical. Both men wanted to bring classical music to a larger audience, but Disney was also keenly aware that *Fantasia* would raise the prestige of the work coming out of his studio. He and his colleagues envisioned a brave new world for animation. In the program book written to accompany the limited-release showing in 1940, one can sense the almost messianic fervor the creators felt. "The beauty and inspiration of music must not be restricted to a privileged few but made available to every man, woman and child," Stokowski declared. "That is why great music associated with motion pictures is so important, because motion pictures reach millions all over our country and all over the world." Disney added: "In a profession that has been an unending voyage of discovery in the realms of color, sound and motion, *Fantasia* represents our most exciting adventure. At last, we have found a way to use in our medium the great music of all times and the flood of new ideas which it inspires." As one unnamed writer put it:

Hereafter, the average listener should be much less humble about his ability to understand good music....In the past, composers have been able to turn only to the comparatively limited mediums of opera and ballet for an interpretation of their works in color and motion. Stokowski, Taylor and

Disney believe that *Fantasia* will suggest to the great composers of our day, a third medium – a medium where color and motion are restricted only by the limits of imagination – the medium which is giving to the public *Fantasia*.

Critical reception of the film was divided. According to media-studies scholar Moya Luckett, “While film critics almost unanimously praised the film as ‘important,’ music critics despised the way it diluted the classics.”⁵

Starting in the late 1930s and continuing for three decades, classical music also was showcased in Hollywood movies through a number of biographical films about famous composers. Romantic-era composers were the preferred subjects of these “biopics,” including one of Chopin called *A Song to Remember* (1945), one of Schumann called *Song of Love* (1947), one of Rimsky-Korsakov called *Song of Scheherazade* (1947), one of Tchaikovsky called *Song of My Heart* (1948), and one of Liszt called *Song without End* (1960). The similarity of the titles gives some hint of the sameness of the biographical approach. The musical performances in these films, however, were of genuine value.

The problem of what the film audience should see while listening to the music was solved in many ways. Frequently, scenes of concerts are shown, with the camera switching from the performance to reaction shots of the concert audience. While the *Fantasia* approach had to do with what the music made the animators think of – be it abstract colors, mice, mushrooms, centaurs, or demons – the biopics sometimes focused on what the composer was thinking of when a piece of music came into his mind. In other words, these films took up the question, what does musical inspiration look like? Admittedly, except in rare cases such as when a com-

poser has expressed something about his thinking or motivation, this question is unanswerable; nevertheless, most composer biopics include scenes of composers composing just as biographical films of artists have scenes of painters painting.

A series of films about popular American composers preceded most of the Hollywood biopics of classical European composers. Warner Bros., the studio that in the 1930s made a number of uplifting films about great men and women of science – Louis Pasteur and Marie Curie, among others – led the way. Throughout the 1940s, the studio released films exploring the life of George M. Cohan in *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942), of George Gershwin in *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945), and of Cole Porter in *Night and Day* (1946). Other studios followed suit, producing biopics of Jerome Kern, Rodgers and Hart, and others. It is no coincidence that this series began with the most flag-waving of the popular American composers, George M. Cohan, who composed the World War I anthem “Over There” as well as “You’re a Grand Old Flag.” Against a backdrop of war and global turmoil, these films seemed to tell viewers, “This is true American culture. This is what we are fighting for.” *Stars and Stripes Forever* (1952), a biopic about John Philip Sousa, was a kind of coda to this series.

The history of films with music physically linked to them is less than one hundred years old. *The Jazz Singer* (1927), featuring Al Jolson both singing and speaking, is celebrated as the start of sound movies, or “talkies.” Movies had never truly been silent, but before 1927, music to accompany them was usually supplied by a pianist, sometimes improvising or else drawing on a stock of music composed for other purposes. For projects of greater prestige, an orchestra exterior to the film played music specifically composed or arranged for the film.

After 1927, the relationship between music and film changed. Hiring composers to write music specifically for a film became standard practice. Indeed, movie studios became major patrons of contemporary composers. For centuries in Europe, the patronage of composers and the fostering of new musical works had been the province of the clergy and the nobility. Things began to change first in the opera house and later in the concert hall and the musical theater – all venues where a paying public drawn from a wide social spectrum could affect the kind of music composed. Hollywood’s patronage of composers further solidified this trend toward accounting for public tastes and desires in new musical works.

With the coming of sound movies, Hollywood studios took on an extraordinary number of composers of the most varied educational backgrounds and musical styles. They also employed hundreds of the best performing musicians to be found in the United States. The economically unstable and unsettling political events of the 1930s – that is, the Great Depression worldwide and the rise of totalitarianism in Europe – funneled a large number of composers and performers to Southern California. From New York came writers of musicals that Broadway could no longer support, including Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, and Cole Porter – the whole Tin Pan Alley pantheon. From Europe came classically trained composers, with Max Steiner, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, and Franz Waxman chief among them.

Steiner, who was born in Vienna in 1888, trained at the Imperial Academy in Vienna and came to the United States in 1916. He worked for RKO and Warner Bros., and in some thirty years he wrote about three hundred film scores, the most famous of which were for *King Kong* (1933), *The Informer* (1935), and *Gone with the Wind* (1939).

Korngold was born in Brno in 1897 and, like Steiner, showed remarkable musical talent at an early age. He managed to keep one foot in the classical music world – writing five operas, a concerto for violin, chamber music, and piano music – and the other foot in the film industry, writing nineteen film scores, two of which – *Anthony Adverse* (1936) and *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1937) – received an Academy Award. Waxman, born in 1906 in Silesia, studied at the Dresden Music Academy and the Berlin Conservatory. After that, he worked for a few years in the German film industry before coming to the United States in 1934. He showed great versatility, writing scores for a range of films in different genres, from horror films to romantic comedies. Like Korngold, he won two Academy Awards, one for *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and one for *A Place in the Sun* (1951). As founder and head of the Los Angeles International Music Festival, Waxman promoted the work of many other contemporary composers. The music of all three of these men reflected their classical training, frequently drawing on a lush, late-Romantic style. Steiner’s “Tara’s Theme” from *Gone with the Wind*, with its threefold yearning octave leaps, is one example among many of this ripe Romantic writing.

In the 1930s and 1940s, sometimes called the golden age of film music, studios had large budgets for music departments with composers, music editors and arrangers, and performers all under contract. The breakdown of the Hollywood studio system, starting in the 1950s, had far-ranging consequences for the employment of composers and for the kinds of music they wrote. The career of Bernard Herrmann, which began in the golden age and continued into the 1970s, is illustrative.

Herrmann had some things in common with Steiner, Korngold, and Waxman, but there was much that set him apart. Herr-

mann was American born (in New York in 1911) and studied at New York University and at Juilliard. Although he was active as a conductor and composer of concert music, his principal fame came from the sixty-one film scores he wrote. Despite, or perhaps with the aid of, a difficult temperament, Herrmann did some of his best work with temperamentally difficult directors. His first film score was for *Citizen Kane* (1941), directed by Orson Welles. He went on to score several films for Alfred Hitchcock, including *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959), and *Psycho* (1960). Herrmann's musical style, as demonstrated in his score for *Psycho*, leaves the romanticism of Steiner, Korngold, and Waxman far behind. He was acutely aware of the essential contribution his music made to the films he worked on, eliciting, at least for a while, an almost reverential respect from Welles and Hitchcock. In "A Lecture on Film Music" Herrmann commented, "[T]he whole recognition scene of *Vertigo* . . . is eight minutes of cinema without dialogue or sound effects – just music and picture. I remember Hitchcock said to me, 'Well, music will do better than words there.'"⁶ He also recalled that Hitchcock was unconvinced about the effectiveness of *Psycho*, but had a change of heart when he heard the score Herrmann composed for the film. At the same time, Herrmann is almost perversely modest about his score for *Psycho*, "universally acknowledged to be one of the most original and influential in cinema history," according to film historian Mervyn Cooke.⁷ Herrmann noted:

Many people have inquired how I achieved the sound effects behind the murder scene. Violins did it! People laugh when they learn it's just violins, and that's interesting to me. It shows that people are so jaded that if you give them cold water they wonder what kind of champagne it is. It's just the strings doing

something every violinist does all day long when he tunes up. The effect is as common as rocks.⁸

As Herrmann's score for *Psycho* shows, new images demanded new sounds. This is perhaps most obvious in the scores written for science-fiction films. Film composers, like brides, may turn to something old, something new, and certainly something borrowed to achieve needed effects. For example, in the sound track of *Alien* (1979), composer Jerry Goldsmith used the sounds of sea shells and the didgeridoo, an Australian aboriginal instrument. John Williams used Caribbean steel drums, out-of-tune kazoos, and other toy instruments for the bar scene in the first of the *Star Wars* movies, producing music that "still sound[s] today like plausible popular music from an alien world."⁹ The "something new" category began with the use of an early electronic instrument, the theremin, in films such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951; score by Bernard Herrmann), *The Thing* (1951; score by Dimitri Tiompkin), and *It Came From Outer Space* (1953). Nowadays, startlingly novel sounds can be produced by a wide range of electronic instruments and synthesizers.

Changes in the type of music written for movies encompassed not only instruments used but matters of organizing musical sounds – that is, matters of musical style. Arnold Schoenberg turned down the chance to write a film score when Irving Thalberg asked him to provide music for *The Good Earth* (1937). But Schoenberg's system of composing with twelve tones was studied by other film composers including Franz Waxman, David Raksin, Alfred Newman, and Hugo Friedhofer. Interestingly, as with jazz, modernist styles of music showed up in cartoons before they appeared in feature-length films. Scott Bradley, who scored many of the Tom and Jerry cartoons for MGM, used tone

rows to accompany the antics of the cartoon characters in *Puttin' on the Dog* and *The Cat That Hated People*. Bradley asserted that “any progress in creative contemporary film music will be made in this medium because endless experiments in modern harmony and orchestration are acceptable.... Since beauty in cartoons is rarely even skin deep, we must employ ‘shock chords’ which sometimes reach the outer limits of harmonic analysis.”¹⁰

Film scores continue their role of surreptitiously bringing new styles of music to a relatively unsuspecting audience. Music in the minimalist style can be heard in the scores Philip Glass has written for *Kundun* (1997), *The Hours* (2002), and *Notes on a Scandal* (2006), each of which received an Academy Award nomination. Music from India, Japan, China, Brazil, and other world cultures can be heard in films made in those nations, but also filtered through the ears of composers working for Hollywood studios. African drumming, Bulgarian and Armenian singing, and a plethora of other sounds all make their colors available for the palette of the film composer. The degree to which this borrowing of sounds and styles is deemed problematic, raising issues of ethical compromise in the appropriation of world music, may depend on whether it is viewed as bio-piracy or as fusion cuisine. Perhaps the most important trend in music for contemporary cinema is the use of electronically generated sounds organized through computers. The skill set and sound memories that a composer of film scores brings to his task today may be entirely different from those of composers in earlier decades.

At this point, to continue my comparison of museums and movies, I must look to museums dedicated to modern art and contemporary artists. The Museum of Modern Art opened in New York City in 1929, just two years after the release of

The Jazz Singer. Two other important modern art museums opened in New York City in the 1930s: the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. These museums and their founders served as important supporters, promoters, and patrons of living artists: “The modern art museum and the modern art object came to exist as a symbiotic relationship,” writes Nancy Einreinhofer.¹¹ Museums have also shown a certain rapprochement with Hollywood studios by treating their audiences as not just pupils but consumers of art. The public pays admission to see the museum’s collections, but may freely enter the gift shop, where objects ranging from postcards and books to household goods, jewelry, and sculptures can be purchased.

Today, new technologies and new musical sonorities and styles are available to composers for film; yet selections of classical music – written well before the films into which they are incorporated and for entirely different purposes – continue to be featured in film scores, sometimes in surprising ways. In *Die Hard* (1988) portions of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony accompany the actions of the European villain rather than the hero. Mervyn Cooke argues that “[t]he terrorist’s elegant appearance and implied musical refinement provide the strongest possible contrast to the all-American vest-wearing Bruce Willis hero who listens to pop music and ultimately saves the day.”¹² Director Stanley Kubrick is infamous for rejecting the score he had commissioned from Alex North for *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), preferring the temp track of music by Johann Strauss, Jr., and Richard Strauss. (A temp track is music chosen by the director in the early days of filming to suggest to the composer the sort of sound the director might like.) Kubrick remarked, ingenuously, “However good our best film com-

posers may be, they are not a Beethoven, a Mozart, or a Brahms. Why use music which is less good when there is such a multitude of great orchestral music from the past and from our own time?"¹³ Kubrick's remark also seems to apply to Lars von Trier's extensive use of the overture to *Tristan und Isolde* in his film *Melancholia* (2011). More shocking, perhaps, is Kubrick's ironic or anempathetic use of music: for example, his juxtaposition of a violent rape scene in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) with the relatively cheerful overture to Rossini's *La Gazza Ladra*. At this point, the comparison between a museum and a movie as a means to introduce the public to masterworks of art becomes tenuous – or indeed, untenable. It is hard to imagine a museum displaying a work of art in order to deliberately subvert the intention of the artist.

Appreciation for the art and artistry of the composer of film scores has increased in the past decades. This enhanced prestige can be detected in the growth of film-score recordings and in the consideration given to film scores as a subject of academic inquiry. For the first decade or two after movies began to have attached sound, the scores for movies that were not musicals were equivalent to background music – important in many ways, but not intended to be the primary focus of the viewer's attention. This situation changed with the advent of the movie soundtrack album. In the mid-1940s, a few recordings of parts of film scores were made, although only for distribution to radio stations for promotional purposes. Technological advances – the twelve-inch LP record in the 1950s and the CD a few decades later – made it both practical and desirable to produce and release movie music that could be listened to without the benefit of visual stimulation. The soundtrack CD continues to be a source of considerable profit for studios and composers.

To take perhaps the most successful example, the prolific John Williams, who has won Academy Awards for his scores for the films *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, and *Schindler's List*, has also won more than a dozen Grammy Awards for "Soundtrack Album" or "Instrumental Composition Written for a Motion Picture." The CD of his score for *Star Wars* has long been a best seller.

In addition, film music is now deemed a worthy topic of study in academia. The history and aesthetics of film music is taught in many music and film departments. The two most important programs for the composition of film music can be found at New York University and the University of Southern California.

I end with a final comparison, this one not between museums and film studios, but rather between museums and movies themselves. A principal function of any museum – above entertainment and education – is the protection and preservation of its collection. Museums conserve masterworks of art, but also utilitarian things – coins, or cooking vessels, or perfume bottles – that can become objects of reverent contemplation if they are old enough. Movies, even those of relatively little "artistic" value, can preserve moments of musical performance that retain the power to surprise and delight. This is particularly true of performances by popular singers, dancers, or instrumentalists. The sound of their performances may be captured on recordings, but the fuller picture, as it were, is saved on film. What may have been produced as ephemera is now preserved in film archives, and we are the richer for it.

ENDNOTES

Charlotte
Greenspan

- ¹ Nancy Einreinhofer, *The American Art Museum: Elitism and Democracy* (London: Leicester University Press, 1997), 36.
- ² *Ibid.*
- ³ Daniel Goldmark, *Tunes for 'Toons: Music and the Hollywood Cartoon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 107.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.
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- ⁶ *The Hollywood Film Music Reader*, ed. Mervyn Cooke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 211.
- ⁷ Mervyn Cooke, *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 208.
- ⁸ *The Hollywood Film Music Reader*, ed. Cooke, 220.
- ⁹ Cooke, *A History of Film Music*, 463.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 297.
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- ¹² Cooke, *A History of Film Music*, 439.
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Swing: From Time to Torque (Dance Floor Democracy at the Hollywood Canteen)

Sherrie Tucker

Abstract: The Hollywood Canteen (1942–1945) was the most famous of the USO and USO-like patriotic nightclubs where civilian hostesses jitterbugged with enlisted men of the Allied Nations during World War II. It is also the subject of much U.S. national nostalgia about the “Good War” and “Greatest Generation.” Drawing from oral histories with civilian volunteers and military guests who danced at the Hollywood Canteen, this article focuses on the ways that interviewees navigated the forceful narrative terrain of national nostalgia, sometimes supporting it, sometimes pulling away from or pushing it in critical ways, and usually a little of each. This article posits a new interpretative method for analyzing struggles over “democracy” for jazz and swing studies through a focus on “torque” that brings together oral history, improvisation studies, and dance studies to bear on engaging interviewees’ embodied narratives on ideologically loaded ground, improvising on the past in the present.

There is No Color Line at This Coast Canteen

– *Chicago Defender*, January 30, 1943

What does it mean to have a body that provides an institution with diversity?

– Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included*¹

Democracy! That’s what it means, Slim! Everybody equal. Like tonight! All them big shots, listening to little shots like me, and being friendly!

– Sgt. Brooklyn Nolan, Hollywood Canteen (1944)

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The Hollywood Canteen (October 3, 1942 – November 22, 1945) was the most famous of the thousands of USO-like nightclubs where civilians entertained military personnel during World War II. Patterned after New York’s Stage Door Canteen, the club featured volunteers who hailed mostly from the guild and unions of the motion picture industry, including glamorous stars like Rita Hayworth, Deanna Durbin, and Hedy LaMarr. Bette Davis was the president of the Hollywood Can-

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teen; John Garfield was vice president. In its own time, the Hollywood Canteen became a powerful backdrop for publicity photos of movie stars appearing patriotic by jitterbugging to swing music with soldiers, feeding them, signing autographs, and generally being friendly and generous with their time, beauty, and fame. The Canteen remains one of the most recognizable articulations of swing as a symbol of the United States, its jitterbugging soldiers and glamorous hostesses epitomizing a selfless, innocent “Greatest Generation,” a unified nation of “Good War” nostalgia.

Yet the Hollywood Canteen is also remembered as the site of conflict when Canteen board members fought over whether people could dance across race lines. When challenged by those less keen on integration, Bette Davis and John Garfield, along with members of the segregated locals of the Los Angeles musicians unions, threatened to pull their support. While the “knockdown drag out fights” about integrated dancing (in segregated Hollywood) might suggest that all was not well at the dance floor of the nation, the narratives that circulated about these battles served to prove that the Hollywood Canteen was an especially democratic space. Such civil rights angles dominated Canteen coverage in the national black press, popular front press, and *Down Beat*, while mentions of race-mixing at the Canteen were absent from the mainstream press.² The democratic, integrated dance floor became prominent in biographies and autobiographies of celebrities of the era, and is well covered in scholarship by historians of jazz and swing, World War II, and Los Angeles, as well as in World War II documentaries and museum plaques.³ Nonetheless, the lasting image in national memory is the white jitterbugging starlet and soldier.

This article is part of a larger study in which I take the dance floor of the Hollywood Canteen as a lens for exploring swing culture as war memory in the United States. By *war memory*, I am thinking of the cultural repository that literature scholar Marianna Torgovnick has called the *war complex*, or the particular ways that national memory of World War II continues to express, for many Americans, “how we like to think of ourselves and to present ourselves to the world, even at those times when the United States has been a belligerent and not-much-loved nation.”⁴ The Hollywood Canteen is part of a larger package of nostalgia of uncomplicated American goodness during World War II that has played, and continues to play, a powerful role in constructing national memory and recruiting patriotic identification (even for those too young to remember the war). What explains the persistent appeal of swing dance, and what alternate narratives are forgotten when swing memory as war memory is the only one remembered? Of the sixty people I interviewed, most of the white participants remembered an integrated dance floor, while most people of color remember a segregated, or partially segregated, space. Nearly everyone thought the Canteen had something to tell us about democracy in the United States. It is in the push and pull of those multiple, contradictory, differently embodied orientations to Hollywood Canteen memory that I’ve found a new way to dance as a swing scholar interested in music, race, and democracy.

This essay focuses, in part, on Amiri Baraka’s (then LeRoi Jones) grammatical intervention indicated in the title of his *Blues People* essay “Swing: From Verb to Noun.”⁵ In this piece, Baraka identifies effects of cross-cultural musical travels from black to white America by tracking the historical route of swing from some-

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thing African American musicians *did* with pulse and forward motion in big band music in the late 1920s through the 1930s, to the static commodity that became known as Swing, a brand name genre that after 1935 spoke primarily to mainstream white America (and middle-class black America), and that largely withheld profits and jobs from African American musicians. In the war years, swing was not only a brand, but a kind of national anthem for the United States, then fighting for world democracy with segregated armed forces, segregated blood supplies, and a social, legal, material, and spatial landscape entrenched in uneven and inconsistent rules about race that white people often were oblivious to. The Hollywood Canteen, with its iconic jitterbugging hostess and soldier, functioning as war memory about a Greatest Generation conceived as diverse, but nearly always depicted as white, would seem to epitomize the noun-side of Baraka's analysis.

But my adherence to Baraka's verb/noun analysis was challenged by conversations with diverse former Canteen-goers, who told wildly different stories about their bodies on the late swing era dance floor. Poet and novelist Nate Mackey's 1995 twist on Baraka's essay, "Other: From Noun to Verb," helps our understanding with an alternative grammatical intervention, moving the concept of *other*, rather than *swing*, from noun to verb form.⁶ Mackey intended to shake up institutional multiculturalism "redress" projects that "nounify" aggrieved communities as "others" for the institution to assist, manage, and include. A multiculturalism project that seeks to diversify white space by including others resembles what race scholar Sara Ahmed has called the *hospitality model* of diversity, in which "whiteness is produced as host, as that which is already in place or at home. To be welcomed is to be positioned as the

one who is not at home."⁷ Mackey argues for a practice that would remember that *other* is what people *do*; it is not what people *are*. Drawing a distinction between two verb forms of other, he identifies 1) *artistic othering* as a practice of "innovation, invention, change on which cultural health and diversity depend and thrive"; and 2) *social othering* as "the centralizing of a norm against which otherness is measured, meted out, marginalized."⁸ The cultural verb "to swing," then, is but one of many examples of artistic othering practices of African Americans, people who have been subjected to social othering. Guests and volunteers at the Hollywood Canteen did and experienced both.

Social dancing and its music are both social and artistic practices – and dancers who *swing* to music that *swings* may navigate social othering and artistic othering in dynamic tension, even in the most noun-destined times and places. Writing about another dance floor in her book *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*, dance and movement scholar Danielle Goldman argues that although New York's Palladium was unique in its integration in the 1950s, it was still "not a 'free' space where everything was equal and anything was possible." But rather than taking evidence of contradiction as occasion to debunk the integrated dance hall, Goldman emphasizes the importance of attending to multidirectional desires and interpretations. In her analysis of improvised dance as a "practice of freedom," she acknowledges that a "variety of constraints imposed by racism, sexism, and physical training shaped how people moved," and that one dancer's experience of a powerful moment, "while meaningful in many ways, [was] neither shared by, nor identical for the dance hall's many patrons."⁹ For Goldman, to let go of an assumption of "sameness" or consensus of dance expe-

rience does not diminish the political power of dancers' abilities to "interact with constraints," and in fact, it comprises "the possibility for meaningful exchange."¹⁰ The contradictions and incompatibilities of dance floor memories at the Hollywood Canteen are absolutely necessary to understand its democratic potential.

An assumption of sameness dominates the either/or noun-verb dichotomy in scholarship on swing's ability to represent American identity. For African American studies scholar Perry Hall, the polarized analyses are that: 1) swing was an unusually integrated cultural formation, expressing populism and multiethnic, multicultural, and interracial mixing as particularly American; or 2) swing represented a blatant example of white American appropriation of black American culture.¹¹

Rather than arguing one side or the other, I am interested in swing's capacity to slip between these poles. If, as cultural and gender theorist Inderpal Grewal has argued, America continues to be imagined as simultaneously multicultural and white, both within the United States and from the perspective of other nations,¹² then the easy slide between swing as either multicultural populism or white domination defines its symbolic potency. How neatly the popular national narratives about swing musicians who pioneered the integration of a segregated industry, and patriotic jitterbug dancers who integrated the dance floor, fit what historian Nikhil Pal Singh has called "civic myths about the triumph over racial injustice" that have become "central to the resuscitation of a vigorous and strident form of American exceptionalism."¹³

When swing culture is narrated as America's "triumph over racial injustice," it drowns out critical opportunities for examining continuing inequalities. Per-

haps it is precisely swing's dual history as musical melting pot *and* crime scene of appropriation that positions it to acquire such a seductive national memory as universally American and democratic. What if swing excels as a national music, not in spite of, but because of its ability to mean different things to many people, while also signaling a unified wartime America? Although the image of the idealized soldier-hostess jitterbugging couple was presented at the time (and rolled out many times since) as a nostalgic representation of national unity and American likability in a time of war, the former Canteen-goers that I talked to often narrated the hinges of noun and verb forms of swing and other. Listening to former Canteen-goers remembering their young swing-dancing bodies is one way to remember connections between the dance floor and the commotion against its surface, to explore in swing memory the tensions of America as the many and the one.

When swing scholarship shifts from music to dance, the analytic center tends to pivot from time to torque. "To swing," defined by jazz and swing scholars who focus primarily on music, tends to apply to conjugation of rhythm, tempo, pulse, and the forward motion often, but not always, achieved in the emphasized second and fourth beats of the four-four rhythm. Jazz critic Kevin Whitehead describes swing as a "headlong, but relaxed sense of propulsion, as if the music was skipping down the sidewalk. It often relies on small surges and hesitations, on placing a note or accent just in front of or behind where a metronome or tapping foot would put it." But, he adds, "Count Basie's bassist Walter Page could place his notes squarely on the beat and swing like crazy."¹⁴

When dance scholars talk about swing, however, we enter a world of physics, the

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“centrifugal force, torque, and momentum” that “keep the partners spinning smoothly.”¹⁵ Historian Lewis Erenberg has emphasized the role of the “intimate communication” of the “dance’s hand clasp,” necessary in order to ensure “that the couple could survive the centrifugal force and the obstacles of the dance.”¹⁶ Jazz historian Howard Spring has argued that it was this new “more physical” way of dancing – involving more parts of the body and more movements per measure (four instead of two) – that spurred the new musical approaches to rhythm and timbre in the music that became known as swing.¹⁷ Swing dance scholars often identify the radical reworking of “ballroom conventions of leaders and followers” into what historian Terry Monaghan called a more “mutually assertive” relationship.¹⁸

Many scholars have highlighted the “breakaway” as the defining property of the lindy hop and jitterbug, representing the integration of individual and community, improvised solo and ensemble – the dance version of what has been celebrated as the democratic principle of jazz. “In most couple dances (the waltz and the foxtrot, for instance),” writes philosopher Robert Crease in his exploration of Hollywood representations of the lindy hop, “the partners hold each other closely enough so that they generally need to do identical footwork with reverse parity lest they tread on each other’s feet.” What was radically new in the lindy, then, was the “development of the breakaway,” which “made possible a flexible couple dance with room for improvisation. Partners could do markedly different steps – even ones unknown to and unanticipated by one’s partner – as long as the basic rhythm was preserved.”¹⁹ It was the “continuous rhythmic play” and “driving reciprocal dynamic” of *dance partners* that Monaghan

identified as swing’s “aesthetic articulation of cultural equity.”

To onlookers, the lindy or jitterbug may look like a back-and-forth, in-and-out motion. But to dancers, “swing” is less like the sway of a pendulum, and more like what would happen if you could “swing” that pendulum at the end of a string around and around over your head.²⁰ The heavy end becomes airborne and seems almost weightless only when you achieve the optimum combination of force, rotation, and distance. Swing it too placidly and it doesn’t get off the ground. Swing it too hard and the string slips out of your hand and the pendulum flies through the neighbor’s window. But swing it just right, just fast enough, with just enough bend to the arm to adjust the speed for the weight – *torque it accurately* – and you and your dance partner achieve a greater level of turning power than either could achieve alone.

In their book *Physics and the Art of Dance: Understanding Movement*, physicist Kenneth Laws and dance pedagogue Arleen Sugano define *torque* as “a kind of force that causes a rotation, like the hand turning a screwdriver or two hands turning a T-shaped wrench to tighten bolts on a car wheel.”²¹ For solo dancers, torque is applied to the floor through the feet, one pushing one way and one the other. In partner dance, the floor and feet still do this work, but in relation to the torque dancers apply to one another. Like a physicist, the experienced swing dancer *appears* to defy gravity, not by fighting it, but by knowing its rules, and using this knowledge to accurately apply the laws of turning power, weight, velocity, distance, and shape. The swing, then, for the lindy or jitterbug, is not all in the rhythm, the tempo, or even the steps. Swing is in the crouch, bend, lean, weight, speed, balance – torque. Music that swings, for experienced swing danc-

ers, is music conducive to the achievement of torque.

Writer and performer Brenda Dixon Gottschild has observed that although the dance was “gender-democratic” in the relatively shared athleticism of the lead and follow, race democracy was limited when white rebellion was projected onto black survival. She argues that the lindy hop was titillating to white youth “in flight from the Protestant ethic” in ways it could not be to African American youth living “on the edge, literally and figuratively.”²² The same pivot points that contributed to the lindy’s “potential to undermine and subvert racism” and that led to integration of racially segregated space (“almost always in the black community”) also rendered swing culture ripe for white primitivist titillation. For white dancers socialized in a culture that constructed blackness as undisciplined, ecstatic, and prone to sexual abandon, the swing-out was about letting go of all control, missing altogether what was new in the lindy for black dancers.²³ By the 1940s, the shift from the lindy to the jitterbug (amid other changes accompanying the mainstreaming of swing) sometimes obscured its origins in black culture. But even this cross-cultural amnesia could not prevent the flow of “primitivist” associations for many white social dancers (and film directors) who often saw the jitterbug as pulling out the stops, rather than as a communicative partnership between a (more) democratized lead and follow that sought flight through balance.

Among other things, the Hollywood Canteen was a democratically conceived, explicitly patriotic, mostly white, supposedly integrated dance floor in a segregated white part of Los Angeles (a sprawling city, most of which was, in the 1940s, permeated with racially restrictive housing covenants). What desires ani-

ated the dance of people blocked by restaurant and nightclub admission policies, as well as the people who were largely unaware that Los Angeles was segregated? Many different cultural associations, embodied experiences, and skill levels were brought to dance. An exuberant lead who learned from the movies might fling his protesting partner around like a rag doll, while a flight-ready follow may never snap her partner out of his self-conscious two-step (one interviewee called it “the GI shuffle”). But it was also possible to achieve mutually enjoyable (though differently experienced) torque: to connect with another through touch and feel, find the point of connection in which bodies move one another, improvising across shared or different orientations (including degrees of resistance, centers of gravity, and mass) and strike a balanced pattern of tension and release that maintained “I” and “we,” the individual and the collective – what we might call the physics of swing democracy. The breakaway didn’t facilitate this on its own. Neither did the couple steps. The swing is in the torque, without which the breakaway and coupling have no connection. At the Hollywood Canteen, and elsewhere, dance floor democracy is collaborative and physical and not guaranteed.

How might we reconceptualize the articulation of democracy and swing culture as the torque as practiced on the unsteady dance floor, and not in the reassuring rocking motion of the pendulum swing or in the patterned opportunities for relative freedom and individualism in the breakaway? How do we speak of torque in relation to social power imbalances of race, gender, class, sex, and rank? Is there a way to store past torque for the future, in self-narrative, for example, in stories of improvised moves on the dance floor? Nostalgia is emptied of torque. But some ways of remembering

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and telling turn the nostalgia into something else, through tone and gesture, humor, and critique. How do people apply turning power to narrative performances of memory? Sometimes, the torque is in the telling.

One dancer narrates her body dancing in an unexpected way: perhaps she breaks the rules, dances across race. Somehow this breach creates an even more democratic dance floor narrative than if there hadn't been a rule to break. Another would-be dancer describes the impact of rejection on the "inclusive" dance floor, maps what it should have been like as a vision of democracy. Another compares the Hollywood Canteen with another, even more democratic dance floor in a more racially inclusive neighborhood of Los Angeles. Another ascribes the democratic achievement of the Hollywood Canteen to the radicals on the staff, rather than to the inherent niceness of Tom Brokaw's Greatest Generation.

Literary scholar and oral historian Alessandro Portelli argues that the point of oral history is not to replace "previous truths with alternative ones," but to listen to them together, for how "each provides the standard against which the other is recognized and defined."²⁴ Listening to the oral narratives in relation to one another, to the official story, and to archival documents, I am not sifting evidence for a preferable version of the past. Instead, I listen for relationships – pulling together and pushing apart – to better understand the persistence and performativity of swing culture as war memory.

I hear the "official" memory of the Hollywood Canteen in virtually every interview; sometimes in unison with it, sometimes in dissonance, and usually a little of each. Oftentimes, there is some point at which I hear the familiar tune torqued in the telling, in which the teller leans away from the official memory, applying a bit of pressure that changes its direction or

meaning. From my own dance as an interviewer, researcher, scholar, and writer, I try to pick up new kinds of critical engagements with swing culture as war memory. Instead of reifying or debunking the nostalgia, I listen for what happens to the nostalgia in Canteen-goers' narratives as they tell me about the club, as well as the social, geographical, and historical ground navigated on their way to, through, and out of it, and how they connect that with the present moment of the interview. I ask for the dance – then try to follow – though I am, of course, the one who initiates, records, and analyzes the event. I ask questions. They answer. But they also ask questions and I answer. I try to lead in such a way that I eventually follow, I want to follow – at least until I return to my office, where I will write about the event without my partners' input. But in the moment of the dance, my listening/following body sends intended and unintended responses to my partners, who read me, perhaps changing directions as a result of something that happens between us – a laugh, a missed joke, body language read as interest or disinterest – as my partners narrate order into the disorder I initiated when I ask them to share memories of their visits to the Hollywood Canteen.

I careened out of each interview rethinking the jitterbugging soldier-hostess dyad, not as a closed symbol of the nation, but an opening for thinking from more than one side, and even more than two sides. For dancers, the dyad was serial and temporary, moving from one partner to another in gendered roles of "lead" and "follow." I did not literally dance with my interviewees, but I did interact with them in their homes, apartments, retirement facilities, and over the phone, seeking connection on the narrative ground of dance. We tested each other's

responses and moved accordingly; interpreting each other in the moment, trading questions and answers, follow-up questions and *stories*. I felt myself pulled into many relationships and orientations to swing's national potency in the 1940s and the present, meanings that never stray too far from the race of space and bodies, be it multicultural bodies in color-blind space, blatant segregation, or the defeat of the color line. My interviews with former Canteen dancers often felt like what sociologist Black Hawk Hancock has called embodied practices of race.²⁵

“Are you black or white?” asked Mel Bryant, within the first five minutes of our first telephone conversation about the Hollywood Canteen.

So far, I had been leading. I initiated the call (referred by his sister, trumpet player Clara Bryant, whom I had interviewed many times for my book on all-woman bands). I introduced myself, and told him that his sister had mentioned that he had attended the Hollywood Canteen while on leave from the Marines. He said yes, this was true. I asked him if I could interview him for my book (yes, again). Then I asked him if the dance floor was integrated, as reported in the black press, the musicians' union magazine, and *Down Beat*.

“Don't you believe it, Sherrie,” he replied. “Don't you believe it.”

I hadn't believed that a dance floor in Hollywood at that time could be easily integrated, and I was eager to learn more about how the Hollywood Canteen fell short of its stated goals. I knew that Mel had been a Los Angeles-based actor for most of his life, and that he would have a unique perspective as an African American military guest who would have already known the limits of segregated Hollywood within the social geography

of Los Angeles, in which most people of color lived south of downtown and east of Main in what was, in the 1940s, known as the Eastside, but is today known as South L.A. Feeling we were on the same page, I asked my usual follow-up questions: “What happened? What were the rules?”

This is where Mel took the lead.

“Are you black or white?” he asked.

“I'm white,” I said.

Somehow, I got the sense that this didn't surprise him. But my racial identification, once said aloud, became a mutually conscious part of our interaction. Our interview turned in different ways than if I had been able to continue to abstractly sense myself as racially neutral (a white habit, and a researcher habit, intensified by the telephone). Now, as Mel gave me an answer, it was in the context of what had become an *overtly* cross-racial dance.

“For black people, integration isn't just about rules. It's about body language and a look on the face. There doesn't have to be a rope across the room. No one has to say anything for you to know when you are not wanted.”²⁶

I am not the first white person Mel had explained this to in his lifetime. Asking me to racially identify had a performative function in our conversation, shifting the concept of racial integration out of the realm of policy or intentions and into the realm of embodied knowledge. My questions about “what happened” and “what were the rules” did not get at his embodied experiences, memories, or what he had to say about the dance floor at the Hollywood Canteen. Race at this point in the interview has to do with different orientations to the question of what constitutes an integrated social space. What Mel had to say about his memories of the dance floor did not fit the framework I presented, in which a club was either integrated or segregated, where we could name

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what was happening and pin down the rules.

In asking me to racially identify, Mel reoriented our conversation so that it had room for his embodied knowledge, shaped by a Jim Crow childhood growing up in a small segregated Texas town, a career as an actor spent moving through predominantly white crowds in a racially marked body, basic training with other black recruits under white officers at Montford Point, a furlough spent trying to reconnect with his new hometown and interrupted acting career in Los Angeles, and memories of his long postwar acting career. To white Canteen-goers, the presence of a lone black body moving through an otherwise apparently white crowd could be seen as evidence of integration (interpreted as either a symbol of America or a caution of un-Americanism in Hollywood, depending on the viewers' visions of how racial difference and democracy were interconnected – both interpretations had currency during World War II). But from the perspective of the person or persons whose burden it is to integrate the room, this same event could register as evidence of white space, a lack of integration.

Mel is explaining to me, explicitly as one black person explaining something to one white person, how, from the perspective of a black person, the text of the crowd – the “body language” and “look on the face” – could indicate a segregated space, even if a black Marine was welcomed into the club. This kind of segregation could pass as integration to most white people in a Hollywood night spot. “The Hollywood Canteen is something to be remembered, and something to be regretted,” said Mel. “It was a different thing, a wonderful thing to have a place where soldiers could go, but it wasn’t integrated in an equal way.”²⁷

I emerged from this first of two telephone interviews with Mel Bryant, turn-

ing in a new direction. Instead of standing with Mel, facing an imperfectly integrated Canteen, I had turned toward him and listened from my body across the phone lines to his telling of his embodied experience. Considering his dance floor perspective helps me to factor body language and facial expressions into the social geography of memory at the Hollywood Canteen as a together-but-unequal democratic space – an acutely accurate portrait of U.S. notions of integration as “democracy,” writ in Mel’s memory of moving through racially differentiated Canteen space. The transmission of body language and facial expression is, admittedly, limited in a phone interview. To speak of visual transmission over the voice-concentrated medium of the phone added another layer of embodied awareness – not more or less intimate – but a reconfiguration of the contact points of intimacy to our conversation.

The next time that Mel and I spoke, he set his Hollywood Canteen memories within a longer trajectory organized around his life as an actor and singer. He told of leaving Denison, Texas, after his high school graduation in 1942, struggling to find housing (“skid row”) and work (a busboy in a cafeteria) in Los Angeles, and being “discovered” by major figures of black Hollywood, actor Mantan Moreland and actor/agent Ben Carter, who helped him land the title role in the MGM patriotic short film *Shoe Shine Boy* (1944). At the same time that the pathway he had hoped and struggled for was rolling out to meet him, the impending interruption of military service loomed. He enlisted in the Marines, hoping to be trained in Southern California, but was sent to a segregated black training camp in North Carolina. When Mel returned to Los Angeles on leave in 1944, he arrived as a Marine on a furlough, but also, importantly, as an actor

who had made one movie and hoped to renew contact and resume his Hollywood career.

Mel's stories of Montford Point, like his stories of Hollywood, tell of navigating courses paved in paradox, maddening combinations of possibility and restriction. He weaves in and out of Montford Point and the Hollywood Canteen as he tells me about that time; and indeed, there are more intersections than one might imagine. A movie star acquaintance from Hollywood – Tyrone Power – was serving as a Marine in North Carolina at the same time as Mel. In one story, Mel tells how his friend, the famous actor, took him to see the swimming pools at nearby Cherry Point where the white Marines were based. This is a story of his friendship with a big star, but it is also a story of segregated and unequal conditions for black Marines. Montford Point also had a pool, he tells me, but black Marines couldn't use it, only the white officers.²⁸

The proximity and restrictions from swimming pools and movie stars at Montford Point mirror his stories of placing himself again and again in restricted Hollywood, where he is successful, well-liked, but always out-of-bounds. On leave in Los Angeles, he stayed as a guest in the home of the black actor and agent who had discovered him, Ben Carter. Wearing his Marine uniform, he boarded the Red Car and rode west and north to the Hollywood Canteen. His voice is slow and low when recounting his approach.

The Canteen was a very strange place. You know, you'd go up to the front door, like usually you'd go with two or three other buddies in the service. And they would sit you down on one side of the building, and the whites on the other side of the building. And the first time they did that, I was wondering what was going on. Are they leading us to slaughter? I thought they were going

to drop us off in a pit or something. We couldn't dance with any of the stars.²⁹ *Sherrie Tucker*

Slaughter. Pit. Word choices, rather than the even keel of his measured speech and baritone voice, conveyed the anger and hurt he ascribed to unequal togetherness.

I asked if there were black hostesses on the nights he was there, to which he replied, "No, no. Oh, no."

"So you're describing a *kind* of segregation?" I asked, still on a mission, it seems, to classify the place as inclusive or exclusive.

"That's what it was," said Mel, "segregation. Bette Davis, she tried her best to break it down. She was all against it. But the powers-that-be won out." Again he advised me to take stories about integration in Hollywood with a grain of salt.

I've heard some of those tales about how we were welcome anywhere. The Ambassador Hotel is there in Hollywood. I went to see Lena Horne there. The man took me and sat me right in the kitchen almost. I couldn't see Lena for the kitchen.³⁰

I returned to the question of rules and policy, only this time I was more careful to work it as one dimension of the unpredictable, improvised volunteer setting of unequal togetherness he had described in our first conversation. Did rules factor into body language, facial expressions, and being led to a far corner of the room?

"There had to be a rule, Sherrie, for it to be that blatant. It was so obvious that we were separate. Like later on they said, 'separate but equal,' but we weren't equal." He was, of course, paraphrasing the now historic 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that overturned legalized segregation in the United States, a reminder that legal precedent would not incorporate this logic until a decade after his Canteen visits and military service.

"If it was really equal, it wouldn't need to be separate," I echoed.

“No,” said Mel, “We’d be all together.” As we wrapped up our conversation, Mel talked about his later movies and television shows, his relentless efforts to integrate professional and public spaces in Las Vegas and Hollywood throughout his career, and the lingering exclusions. Painful among his postwar examples was his story of being denied entry when he tried to see his former Marine Captain, Bobby Troupe, perform at a Hollywood nightclub.

Just before we hung up, I pulled us once more toward the Hollywood Canteen. I asked Mel if he remembered any black volunteers at the club, celebrities perhaps.

He paused for a minute. “I remember Louise Beavers said she was going out one night, but I don’t know if they let her in or not.” He chuckled. “I’m sure they must have. Surely they wouldn’t turn her out. Because she had just done that picture, *Imitation of Life* with Claudette Colbert, where she played the black lady that made a fortune for the white woman.” He laughed. “Yeah, I’m sure they let *her* in!”³¹

The rhetorical mode again: a critical, not literal spin, as I took it, but one that torqued the either/or of the together-but-not-equal basis of inclusion that Mel connected with the Hollywood Canteen within his broader repertoire of World War II memories. Black people were allowed in these together-but-not-equal spaces (the Canteen, Hollywood, the military), but only within the same social relations as depicted in the movies: never equals, always at the service of white people. The uncomfortable tangle of a soldier-actor relegated by race to the far corners of the room excludes him, even while it includes him in a space that was advertised at the time, and celebrated for decades afterward, as the apex of progressive movie star-soldier hospitality. His presence may have supplied evidence for some dancers that the Canteen was sim-

ply and easily integrated. But Mel, throughout our interview, has pushed back at this interpretation, applied torque by exposing the torqueless results of a democratic dance of the colorblind leading the colorblind. He reads others reading his body, and he narrates the contradictions of Canteen inequality: it is wonderful on the one hand, and hierarchical and racially exclusive on the other. The Canteen is rendered a barely open door – like that of the MGM commissary, the lounge in the Ambassador hotel, casting calls in the motion picture industry – one that had to be used again and again, under uncomfortable and sometimes humiliating circumstances, if it was ever going to provide entry. To perform, in our interview, the stickiness of this door seemed a way for Mel to write/right himself as an actor on the democratic dance floor. This together-but-not-equal integration, as remembered and narrated by Mel, included being allowed in (unlike most Hollywood nightclubs), then being led to certain parts of the club with other black servicemen, not being allowed to dance with the stars, feeling more tolerated than welcomed, and not seeing any black hostesses.

Mel’s narrative of not dancing torques the inclusion model of integration, turning Hollywood (and U.S.) democracy to face the contradictions of unequal togetherness. Some stories about achieving torque on the dance floor also “torque back”: when people narrate dance floor memories in such a way as to channel expectations of the typical telling of democratic dancing, and then lean at a bit of a different angle, bend the knees a little more, shift the play of pattern and surprise, turning it into *something else*. These are the moments when narrative pressure applied to the dance floor of the nation produces a different kind of dance floor democracy.

Jeni LeGon (born Jennie May Ligon) was a well-established dancer in theaters and movies, a chorus line organizer, and a dance teacher when she began receiving calls to bring her chorus line and dance students up from the Eastside to the Hollywood Canteen two or three times a month between November 1942 and April 1943. She was still a well-known dancer and dance teacher when I first interviewed her in 2004. In her late eighties, she was enjoying her celebrity amid the tap revival. She maintained an active schedule, giving workshops around the world, and speaking about her long career that spanned from the chorus line of the Count Basie Orchestra in the early thirties, to seasons on black vaudeville with the Whitman Sisters, to an on-and-off relationship with the motion picture industry, dictated by the limits of success in Hollywood for black artists. Her dance sequences were often truncated or cut, a pattern she attributes to the jealousy of powerful white women stars who did not wish to be upstaged.

In 1941, she helped her brother, Alfred Ligon, purchase books in preparation of opening the first black bookstore in Los Angeles, and she ran her dance school out of the same building on East Jefferson in the Central Avenue District. It was in the midst of her varied career training dancers, putting acts together, and performing in clubs, theaters, and movies that someone called her up and asked her to bring her chorus line to volunteer at the Hollywood Canteen. "They just called me directly and asked me if I could bring the girls down. At first I objected." As she recalled, the caller explained that the Canteen "needed black girls to dance with the black boys. And I said, 'Well, I don't like that.' And they said, 'Well, that's the rules,' or something like that." She thought it over and decided to take her dancers up to Hollywood. "I figured, well, the boys

were putting their lives on it, so it didn't hurt us to do that, you know. I didn't like it particularly."³²

Jeni narrated her integration of the hostess-side of the Canteen as a moral compromise. She agreed to dance, not in order to approve of the Canteen as a symbol of democracy, but to support black soldiers who would otherwise be ignored in a club that white liberals viewed as integrated. Importation of black hostesses for clubs in locations where black people did not – and were not allowed to – live was a common solution for some white-dominated USOs and USO-like Canteens that "welcomed" soldiers of color, while at the same time preventing mixed dancing. Although the black press vociferously critiqued the many Jim Crow canteens that turned black soldiers away, the same newspapers did not fault those that called upon black hostesses to integrate the dance floors of clubs in white-restricted areas such as Hollywood. Instead, the readiness of black communities to supply last-minute hostesses was celebrated as an expression of the Double Victory campaign, combating racism at home and fascism abroad. For example, in a March 1943 story in the *California Eagle*, the secretary of the segregated black musicians union local 767, Florence Cadrez, was congratulated for securing "Mates for Sailors" when a Canteen Officer of the Day called her up with the emergency alert that "90 Negro sailors were arriving at the Hollywood Canteen in two hours." Cadrez was able to rustle up "30 Negro girls" who "were ready and waiting when the sailors arrived."³³

But in recounting the integrated Hollywood Canteen's dependence on the lengthy commutes of black women from the Eastside on an on-call basis, Jeni's narrative takes us to the other side of that phone call, to the point of view of a black dancer and actress. To secure black "mates" for

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black men is cause for hesitation because of the racist history that constructs black men as predators of white women. The labor of all hostesses was to cheerfully entertain all military guests, but while some white interviewees told stories of dancing across race without incident, others spoke of being instructed not to dance across race, and even of a shore patrol officer who beat up black men who danced with white hostesses. By this logic, the labor of imported black hostesses ensured same-race democratic dancing, enlisting black hostesses in the service of whiteness that can see itself as inclusive. But, as Jeni told me in our interview, the city had far more welcoming places for black soldiers – not in Hollywood, but in the Eastside. “They could come to the black clubs, in the black neighborhood, which was Central Avenue, of course. We had a whole bunch of clubs and they could come there and have a ball if they wanted to, you know. But the Hollywood Canteen was supposed to be top dog . . . so, naturally everybody wanted to go . . . because it was Class A.”

But one night . . . there was one white boy on the floor dancing with different girls and they weren’t dancing very well, and I was dancing with one of the black boys, and [the white boy] was watching me and I was watching him because he was such a damn good dancer. So, anyway, what turned out was that he came and asked me to dance with him and I said sure. And we went out and started jittering, and everybody on the floor moved out and let us take the floor and we just had a ball. And he and I danced all over that bloody room that time. And everybody just stood back and cheered and carried on, and it was really fun. I mean, you know, just the black and white thing and that was the end of it, but this particular night, we showed them it just didn’t have to be that way. We were just rhythmically wedded, you know what I mean, we just

danced similarly and we were good together. And so that’s what it was. He’d throw me out and I’d come back, we’d do the boogie, all that sort of business. It was just a fun thing, and we were having such a good time, he and I, you know, enjoying one another’s ability to do the things that we could do together, not having seen one another or known anything about one another before.

I heard Jeni’s telling of this story as an artistic othering in which she animates her younger self at the Hollywood Canteen as a political actor who torques her intended role as an othered political action figure. She narrates herself and her dance partner as modeling alternative notions of democracy on the dance floor, while other national subjects watch and cheer. In saying yes to the white soldier, not because she “can’t say no” but because she thinks he is a damn good dancer, she is saying no to a nation that imagines black male predators and white female prizes. And in narrating this dance as taking place in a segregated environment, she says no to Hollywood’s claims to colorblindness. While critical of the official story, Jeni’s story also highlights a utopian vision of interracial jitterbugging at the Hollywood Canteen, albeit from the point of view of a black woman exercising agency. Dance floor democracy, in her telling, is not guaranteed. It is achieved in the moment, among a small set of dancers attuned to each other’s moves and a crowd of appreciative onlookers, within and against and despite constraints. And it is achieved in the interview, as she torques back in what she chooses to tell the academic, whose questions, inflections, and responses also exert energy in this transaction.

Mel Bryant and Jeni LeGon are just two of sixty former Canteen-goers who shared with me their very different narra-

tives of navigating the swing dance floor of the nation sixty-five years after the fact. As I listened to former Canteen-goers traverse the social geographies of memory, narrating in the present their youthful swing dancing bodies moving through patriotically charged space, I could usually pick up some strains of the unified feel-good version of World War II swing nostalgia (pitched at different volumes); but I also heard it actively pushed and pulled by narrators approaching it through unique orientations to its social geography. Even those whose memories most resembled the sentiments expressed by nostalgia offered insights into the difference it makes to imagine an embodied point of view from one or the other side of the jitterbugging couple.

In our interviews, former Canteen-goers danced with and against the footsteps of that idealized jitterbugging couple. A

Hollywood Canteen analysis that could include them all would torque the official story through differentiated dance floor travels, yielding both less and more room to move. In telling the dance floor of the nation as a place where some bodies achieve flight, some bodies are grounded, and some bodies are injured, we accommodate more restrictions, but also more interpretative space, more unexpected turns, more critique. In fact, one could say that in their differences, dissonances, and sporadically achieved torque, the Canteen interviewees achieve more democracy – if the goal of a democratic dance floor is not only to divide people in half and match (some of) them in ideologically appropriate paired units of lead/follow, but also to create a space where all orientations pull, all touches transmit and receive signals, and all bodies and power relations are weighted into the equation.

ENDNOTES

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- ² See, for example, "No Jim Crow at Calif. Canteen," *Afro-American*, May 8, 1943; "Bette Davis Upholds Mixed Couples at Movie Canteen," *Chicago Defender* (national edition), January 9, 1943; and "Canteen Heads Have Row over Mixed Dancing," *Down Beat*, April 15, 1943, 1.
- ³ James Spada, *More Than a Woman: An Intimate Biography of Bette Davis* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 193; Bette Davis with Michael Herskowitz, *This 'N That* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1987), 128; and David W. Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big-Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 161–162.
- ⁴ Marianna Torgovnick, *The War Complex: World War II in Our Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2.
- ⁵ LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, "Swing: From Verb to Noun" (1963), reprinted in *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. William J. Harris (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991), 33–50.

- 6 Nathaniel Mackey, "Other: From Noun to Verb," in *Jazz Among the Discourses*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 76–99.
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- 8 Mackey, "Other: From Noun to Verb," 76–77.
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²⁷ Ibid.

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Fancy Meeting You Here: Pioneers of the Concept Album

Todd Decker

Abstract: The introduction of the long-playing record in 1948 was the most aesthetically significant technological change in the century of the recorded music disc. The new format challenged record producers and recording artists of the 1950s to group sets of songs into marketable wholes and led to a first generation of concept albums that predate more celebrated examples by rock bands from the 1960s. Two strategies used to unify concept albums in the 1950s stand out. The first brought together performers unlikely to collaborate in the world of live music making. The second strategy featured well-known singers in songwriter- or performer-centered albums of songs from the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s recorded in contemporary musical styles. Recording artists discussed include Fred Astaire, Ella Fitzgerald, and Rosemary Clooney, among others.

After setting the speed dial to 33 1/3, many Americans christened their multiple-speed phonographs with the original cast album of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* (1949) in the new long-playing record (LP) format. The *South Pacific* cast album begins in dramatic fashion with the jagged leaps of the show tune "Bali Hai" arranged for the show's large pit orchestra: suitable fanfare for the revolution in popular music that followed the wide public adoption of the LP. Reportedly selling more than one million copies, the *South Pacific* LP helped launch Columbia Records' innovative new recorded music format, which, along with its longer playing time, also delivered better sound quality than the 78s that had been the industry standard for the preceding half-century.

Arriving at the midpoint of the twentieth century, the LP initiated a long-format era in American popular music that lasted just over a half-century. The introduction of the compact disc (CD) in the early 1980s, with its even longer playing time (seventy-four minutes or more), advanced the postwar bias

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toward long formats; for while the LP and single 45s (introduced by RCA Victor in 1949) had previously shared the market, the CD's appearance caused short-format recorded music products to disappear entirely. If pop music fans in the 1990s wanted to own one song (say, Celine Dion's recording of "My Heart Will Go On"), then they had to buy an entire CD (in this case, the original soundtrack recording for the film *Titanic*). The material conditions of buying and listening to popular music during the long-format era encouraged (or forced) listeners to buy popular music in bulk. These conditions faded rather quickly at the turn of the twenty-first century, when ubiquitous high-speed Internet connections enabled the purchase and sharing (or theft) of digital music files online. This development rendered the CD, the final evolutionary stage in recorded music's physical form, an endangered species.

The twentieth century, unlike the present, was a time when the recorded music marketplace turned on the production and purchase of thin, flat, round objects. The arrival of the LP was, arguably, the most aesthetically significant technological change in the century of the recorded music disc. The introduction and early years of the LP, and the question of how to fill the format's expanded time frame, is the focus of this article.

For an anxious music industry, which had to create customers for both long-form popular music and the equipment necessary to play it, the original Broadway cast album seemed the perfect answer to the aesthetic and marketing challenges presented by the newly arrived LP. The 78 format held only three minutes of music per side; for fifty years, recorded popular music had been an art of the miniature.¹ The LP promised more expansive audio

landscapes: about forty-five minutes at its longest, divided about equally onto two sides. Broadway shows in the 1950s usually contained roughly that much music (if the dance music and minor songs were omitted), and the fixed track order of the LP kept the songs in show order. The original cast LP promised unlimited access to the sounds of Broadway; from a comfortable seat at home, albeit with a totally obstructed view, the listener could focus on what really counted: the music, the lyrics, the pit orchestra, and the voices of Broadway's star performers.

Within a decade of the LP's introduction, the cart began pulling the horse. Columbia Records financed the show *My Fair Lady* (1956) and reaped huge profits: the show's cast LP on Columbia (featuring Julie Andrews) topped *Billboard's* album chart for fifteen weeks. One hundred eighty-four original cast albums appeared on *Billboard's* pop album chart between 1955 and 2009.² Twenty-two of these reached the top ten; all but one of those appeared between 1955 and 1964. (The outlier was the cast album for *Hair*, released in 1968.) This period – after the LP had made its way into American homes; before the Beatles led a rapid transformation of the format to a youth-oriented vessel of rock artistry – saw the major record labels exploring new ways to deliver popular music to adult audiences, the primary buyers of the LP for the format's first fifteen or so years. While the Broadway cast album was a fairly obvious way to fill forty-five minutes of music in a set order, other organizational principles for the popular music LP were needed.³

LPs work best when the delicate needle at the end of the lightweight tone arm is allowed to ride the groove from the edge to the center of the disc without interruption. Dropping or picking up the needle in the middle of a side is always tricky:

serious phonograph users, concerned for the health of both the needle and the disc's groove, invariably frown on the practice. Satisfying LPs sustain the listener's interest, each succeeding track making sense in the larger whole, the larger whole providing a unified experience that warrants repeat listening or, at least, playing. Except in certain cases, like the Broadway cast LP, the order of tracks on early LPs proved less important than the creation of an overall tone or mood. Thus, the LP developed not as a linear or narrative large-scale form so much as a block of time within which similar recordings were grouped together. Repeated listening to LPs can have the effect of making the order of tracks feel inevitable: listeners learn to anticipate the next track because the order of songs is set. (Listeners raised on LPs know how the brain comes to anticipate the next song in the silence between tracks.) Awareness of whether side A or side B was playing also shaped LP listening. (The CD, with its one very long side, and the CD player, with its anarchic skip and shuffle buttons and its portability, changed the experience of long-form listening appreciably.)⁴

The utility of a unifying theme or concept for a successful LP was recognized by the record industry from the start. Producers did not imagine that listeners wanted to sit through a twenty-minute pop song. Rather, meaningful arrangements of recordings that generally conformed to the three-minute length of the 78 became the norm, yielding a standard of five to six songs, or tracks, per side. The LP emerged as a musical space in which ten to twelve tracks were grouped around an organizing idea or notion, expressed visually on the square-foot canvas of the LP's cardboard jacket or sleeve. (Only with the beginning of the long-format era did images become central to the design of popular music products; album

covers being, in essence, advertisements for the sonic contents inside.) Several strategies or concepts for grouping tracks into an LP during the pre-rock and roll history of the format stand out. These approaches to large-scale LP form shaped the careers of individual performers, the choices on offer to popular music listeners, and the landscape of America's musical history.

One organizational strategy for the LP treated the format as a sonic meeting place where songwriters, singers, and musicians might enjoy sustained interaction unlikely to occur in live performance. These musical encounters, relationships lived out in the recording studio, had to be sturdy enough to yield an LP's worth of tracks. Many studio collaborations on LPs proved revelatory, bringing together performers who might otherwise never have met. (In one case, detailed below, performers sharing an LP met only by way of multitrack recording methods made possible by the introduction of magnetic tape, another postwar innovation that reshaped popular music.) Some of these collaborations introduced a historical angle to popular music, with the LP serving as a means of looking back at the pop music past while making music that tapped into the present. The roomy LP, a format designed for domestic use, widened the terrain of popular music, opening new spaces where artists could express themselves in more expansive ways than was allowed for by the three-minute single, and where listeners could luxuriate in music unlikely to be made anywhere else.

The pioneers of the concept LP that I discuss here created discs best described as casually unified.⁵ When experienced in their entirety today, these discs offer long-lasting pleasure, as well as access and insight into a past way of listening. These LPs also demonstrate that rock

musicians of the mid-1960s – groups celebrated in popular music history such as the Beatles and the Beach Boys – did not invent the notion of the concept album or the LP as a unified form; the first generation of pop LP artists and producers did. The major difference between rock concept LPs and the earlier round of pop concept LPs is that the former offered new songs, generally authored by the performers themselves, while the latter mostly took well-known hits from the pre-war decades – Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and Hollywood tunes from the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s – and arranged them in new sonic garb that appealed to adult listeners. On these discs, pop and jazz artists can be heard painting on a large canvas, where a consistent approach to a well-chosen selection of songs yielded, on occasion, a whole that was bigger than the sum of its parts.⁶

In 1953, jazz producer and promoter Norman Granz pioneered the concept LP as musical encounter with the release of *The Astaire Story*, a four-disc set that paired the musical movie star Fred Astaire with an interracial jazz combo led by pianist Oscar Peterson and featuring Barney Kessel (guitar), Alvin Stoller (drums), Charlie Shavers (trumpet), Flip Phillips (saxophone), and Ray Brown (bass). All six musicians were associated with Granz's Jazz at the Philharmonic (JATP) tours and recordings.

Beginning in 1944, Granz released albums of 78s containing live recordings from JATP concerts. These records captured the often raucous exchange JATP cultivated between performers and audiences. The home listener had to remain attentive to his phonograph – constantly flipping and switching 78s – to re-create the concert experience heard on these discs. With their superior sound quality and generous length, LPs promised easier

access to the JATP experience. Indeed, “recorded live” LPs would become an important part of popular music.⁷ Studio-made LPs, however, called for a different approach, and Granz's impulse toward crafting longer listening experiences found full expression in the Astaire/JATP set, which exploited the possibilities of the LP as a musical meeting place early in the long-format era. And of course, the group featured on *The Astaire Story* would never have shared the stage at a live performance. Only in the realm of the recording studio could such a meeting take place.

Over the course of a month's worth of recording sessions in December 1952 – Astaire was simultaneously filming *The Band Wagon* at MGM – the group recorded thirty-nine tracks that Granz had selected. With the exception of a few instrumentals, all feature songs connected to Astaire's career on the Broadway stage or in Hollywood films between 1924 and 1953. Granz had Astaire record spoken introductions to several of the tracks, situating select songs within the singer's personal history and/or in jazz history. Jacket copy and liner notes became the natural place for this kind of information with later concept LPs; here, it is part of the listening experience.

Making *The Astaire Story* placed Astaire outside his comfort zone. When making musical films, he was accustomed to rehearsing in seclusion, crafting a complete number for the screen, inclusive of musical structure, choreography, camera angles, and implied narrative. This thoroughly rehearsed routine was then efficiently transferred to film, in manageable sections involving multiple retakes and much post-production finish work. At the *Astaire Story* sessions, Astaire showed up and sang songs he already knew with musicians who already knew each other well. The arrangements were done on the spot. The mikes were live; the still new mag-

netic tape was rolling; and by the fourth song recorded, a version of George and Ira Gershwin's "'S Wonderful," the group had audibly jelled. Peterson and Kessel trade ideas they had employed on an earlier recording of the tune, and Astaire's vocals provide an added layer, one that is not entirely necessary. The movie star's performance is casual and self-effacing, projecting his awareness that, as a singer among jazz players, this exercise in collaboration was not strictly about him. By the end of the month together in the studio, Astaire was improvising, too. He tap danced to some blues choruses provided by the rhythm section and even played stride piano on the song "Not My Girl" – a tune composed by Astaire – before handing the keyboard back to Peterson.

These concept LPs – sold separately and as a deluxe set including Astaire's autograph – opened a space where the categories of jazz and popular music, alike under stress in the postwar musical marketplace, might productively overlap. *Down Beat's* review recognized the seemingly divided market for *The Astaire Story*, beginning separate paragraphs with "If you're an Astaire fan . . ." and "If you're a jazz fan . . ." Granz valued the divided aspect of the collaboration he engineered, a musical meeting that could have happened nowhere but in the long-form realm of the LP.⁸

Granz's belief that LP listeners appreciated popular song history led to a landmark series of concept LPs released on his new record label, Verve. Organized around songwriters and featuring jazz and pop singer Ella Fitzgerald, the series began with *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Cole Porter Song Book*, an unexpected 1956 best seller. Follow-up discs continued through 1964, anthologizing the songs of Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, Duke Ellington, Irving Berlin, George and Ira Gersh-

win, Harold Arlen, Jerome Kern, and Johnny Mercer. Each disc or set of discs was unified musically by assigning a single well-known jazz pop arranger – Buddy Bregman, Paul Weston, Nelson Riddle, Billy May – the task of setting the songs for Fitzgerald's voice. The Ellington set used Ellington's still-vibrant big band; Ellington's longtime collaborator Billy Strayhorn arranged all the charts for Fitzgerald's tracks.

Several factors contribute to the aesthetic completeness of the Fitzgerald *Song Book* cycle of concept LPs. In selecting the tunes, Granz mixed familiar songs from each songwriter's catalog with forgotten tunes. He also had Fitzgerald record obscure verses to well-known choruses. For example, Cole Porter's surprising verses to "Don't Fence Me In" help the listener contextualize this unlikely cowboy tune by the most urbane of songwriters. The pleasures of "Over the Rainbow" are enhanced by the surprise of arriving at its famous chorus only after enjoying its unknown verse. The historical bent of the project is pronounced: it is an education to listen to a Fitzgerald *Song Book* LP, even for listeners who think they know this repertoire. The always "classy" arrangements generally steer clear of trendy beats or gimmicks, giving off a kind of post-swing, jazz-infused pop luster. Because of this, the recordings can be tough to place historically. Big band jazz, minus improvisatory solos, informs much of the sound, with a raft of studio orchestra violins waiting in the wings ready to enter with a sweetening effect. The arrangements are not calibrated for success on the radio – many exploit the soft end of the dynamic spectrum – and reward contemplative listening in a quiet environment. The discs can perhaps be fully taken in only when treated like classical music: attention paid is rewarded again and again. The "classic" status of the Fitzgerald *Song*

Books was reinforced in the mid-1990s, when all fourteen discs were rereleased as a box set of CDs, winning the 1995 Grammy Award for Best Historical Album.⁹

Fitzgerald's approach on the *Song Book* series was shaped by the circumstances of its recording and her own flexible musical identity. She recorded the *Song Books* in a hurry, in sessions crammed between tours – Granz managed all aspects of her career at the time – often with almost no preparation.¹⁰ Recording many songs that were unfamiliar to her (and most any listener), songs she would otherwise never have sung, Fitzgerald delivers the lyrics and the tune in a fashion that effectively teaches the songs to the listener. She never calls attention to herself; her jazz phrasing only slightly alters the printed text. Fitzgerald seldom does any jazz scat singing on the discs (except for the Ellington set, which stands out for its pronounced jazz content), and so the full range of her talent is not on display. Instead, Fitzgerald subordinates her own musical inventiveness to the songwriters the discs honor. The strategy proved enduringly satisfying, even if the *Song Books* offer a limited view of the singer. But Granz did not neglect to capture Fitzgerald singing live in this era. The LP *Ella at the Opera House* (1958) affords a useful contrast to the *Song Book* discs. This live disc features much scat singing, with a muffed lyric charmingly negotiated and Fitzgerald's easy relationship with her supporting musicians expressed in chuckling laughter. By contrast, the studio discs get everything just right, with Granz's goal of perfection captured in conversational exchanges between Fitzgerald and the musicians on outtakes included as bonus tracks on the CD reissues (see "Let's Do It" on the *Cole Porter Song Book*).

The long career of singer Rosemary Clooney represents a third example of

the LP as a meeting place for singers, musicians, and songwriters. Clooney was continually active as a recording artist from the early 1940s until her death in 2002. She gained initial fame as a pop singles artist with the dialect novelty hit "Come On-A My House" (1952), which launched her career on radio, record, film, and television. In the latter half of the 1950s, Clooney began making LPs, and she continued to make concept albums for almost the next fifty years. Three albums from her first period of long-form recording are worth a close listen as a group: Clooney with the bands of Duke Ellington and Perez Prado, and a disc of duets with Bing Crosby. On this triptych of LPs, each made under different circumstances, Clooney appears as a masterful and adaptable artist at the center of postwar, pre-rock, jazz and dance-oriented pop. Hearing her on these discs, which together last more than an hour-and-a-half, reveals an artist with the flexibility to shade her sound to new musical environments while always sounding like herself. Her unfailing sense of humor and self-possession allow Clooney to consistently play the right expressive card. The conceptual space of the LP gave Clooney the room to demonstrate her artistry in ways no other venue provided.

In 1956, Clooney collaborated with the Duke Ellington Orchestra on *Blue Rose*, a disc of Ellington and Strayhorn tunes.¹¹ When the project was proposed, Clooney was pregnant and living in Los Angeles. Her doctors advised her not to travel. Ellington was tied up in New York for several months and couldn't travel either. So Strayhorn acted as go-between; selecting the songs and setting the arrangements with Clooney in Los Angeles, then taking his arrangements east to be recorded by Ellington, then returning west to work with Clooney in the studio, where she added her vocals. Plans to title the

album *Inter-Continental* were scrapped for fear listeners would be turned off by too much emphasis on the technologically mediated nature of the collaboration.¹²

The Ellington Orchestra's sound was grounded on Ellington and Strayhorn's complementary efforts to weave the individual instrumental voices of the band's roster into unmistakable sonic tapestries. Timbre and texture drove the Ellington ethos, and Clooney, entering this new context, merged her voice into the group. The best example comes on her wordless vocal on the title track, with Clooney singing a horn part and effectively folding herself into the band. At the start of "Mood Indigo," Clooney's wordless vocals are double-tracked, the technology of the 1950s recording studio turning her into a one-woman reed section. The same passage, played by the Ellington reeds, follows, blurring the line between singers and instrumentalists in a manner completely in the band's tradition. Across the album, Clooney uses a soft and supple approach: scooping, sliding, and bending pitches more than usual; letting the microphone do the work of projecting; her rhythmic timing swung to a greater degree than usual as she feels the big beats in the accompaniments, which typically offer sustained, slow-changing chords. Clooney does all this without sounding the least bit mannered. Unsurprisingly, she does no vocal improvisation, sticking to the tune and her underlying identity as a pop singer who delivers words and music with directness and clarity, here in the graceful and iconic jazz setting of the Ellington Orchestra.

In sharp contrast to *Blue Rose's* blue-tinted soundscapes, *A Touch of Tabasco* (1959) serves up red-hot tracks as vibrant as the disc's red and yellow cover. This LP joined Clooney with Perez Prado and his orchestra, the top Cuban band in the United States, then enjoying the Mambo-

craze of the late 1950s. (RCA Victor even marketed the disc with tiny bottles of Tabasco sauce.) Here, Clooney belts it out in Spanish and English. She rides the textured beat provided by Prado's battery of percussion and allows the energy of the band to put an unusually pushed color into her voice. She is always herself, but sounds transformed nonetheless by this sustained association with an exciting "ethnic" style. Fake pop music dialects had made Clooney a star, even though she hated singing "Come On-A My House" and the predictable dialect-laden follow-ups she was forced to make at the start of her career. But on *A Touch of Tabasco*, she sounds completely comfortable and full of vocal vitality.

Most of the tracks are quite short. Few last longer than two-and-a-half minutes; one clocks in at a mere minute-and-a-half. Several reach a dynamic and textural climax only to abruptly cut off, the listener left panting for the next scintillating beat. Prado's layered dance rhythms never repeat themselves from track to track, making *A Touch of Tabasco* a catalog of Latin grooves, several hinting at pop trends to come in the 1960s. On the liner notes, Clooney's husband, the Puerto Rican-born actor José Ferrer, weighed in on the LP's mix of "Mom's apple pie and frijoles," advising the listener that "if, unaccountably, you are surprised by [the album's] easy excitement, devoid of stunts and freak effects, if you are puzzled by the comfortable blend of two apparently disparate talents, that's *your* problem. Me, I just sit back and listen, and in my old-fashioned way, I murmur, '*Loco, hombre, loco.*'"

Clooney's 1958 duet LP with Bing Crosby, *Fancy Meeting You Here*, squares the circle for studio recordings, its rich quality sounding spontaneous even after repeated listening. The concept of the album – articulated in the title song, written espe-

cially for the disc by Sammy Cahn and Jimmy Van Heusen – takes mostly old tunes about falling in love in exotic places and divides them into effective duets. All the songs sport snappy tempos and come dressed in special lyrics and added counterpoint melodies. A powerful, swinging studio orchestra arranged and conducted by Billy May provides frequently comic support that, at certain moments, verges on the symphonic. It is a meticulously made confection, crafted with care but giving the effect of being blithely tossed off; in all, a seriously fun piece of popular art.¹³

The final track on both sides of the disc employs the same song, another new tune by Cahn and Van Heusen, called “Love Won’t Let You Get Away.” The side B performance treats the song in straightforward fashion; side A closes with a shorter version, with lyrics that allude to songs already heard on the record. Celebrating the end of side A, Clooney sings, “Here comes another side,” and the pair promises the listener, “We won’t let you get away.” This invitation to flip the record – a reference to the physical form of the LP and an argument that this LP was enjoyed best when heard whole – evokes the world of golden age radio, when Crosby and Clooney were both regular guests in American homes, mixing their songs with friendly patter and jokes. Radio, and the variety television modeled after it, opened endless stretches of time that needed constant filling. The finely tuned *Fancy Meeting You Here* elegantly inserts spoken and sung exchanges for Clooney and Crosby in the spaces within the songs, distilling the essence of personality-driven comedy and music that, in the late 1950s, was fading to silence. The lightly worn virtuosity of the professional entertainer finds its Platonic ideal in the thirty-eight minutes Crosby and Clooney share with each other and the listener on *Fancy Meeting You Here*.¹⁴

Clooney’s career and personal life crashed and burned in the late 1960s, and in 1977, she published a surprisingly frank memoir of her passage through drug addiction.¹⁵ Reentering a musical market now uninterested in her classic pop credentials, Clooney remade her career. She became a cabaret singer, did old-timer’s tours with other former “girl singers,” and embarked on a sustained LP- and (later) CD-making project that lasted over twenty years.

Signing with Concord Records, a modest jazz label out of Northern California, Clooney released twenty-six albums between 1978 and 2002 (the year of her death). All were concept albums on the pre-rock model, grouping eight to ten classic popular songs around a central idea. With a shift to CD releases in the 1990s, her albums began to average fifteen or so tracks, the longer format allowing for a more expansive exploration of each album’s topic. Clooney did singer salutes (Bing Crosby, Billie Holiday), songwriter song books on the Fitzgerald model (a series of seven discs), collaborations with surviving big bands (Woody Herman and the Count Basie ghost band), historical anthologies (songs from World War II), explorations of song types (ballads, show tunes, the inevitable Christmas LP), a disc of Brazilian bossa nova, and an album of songs about traveling. Several of her concept albums carry personal associations. *Dedicated to Nelson* (1996) salutes the arranger Nelson Riddle, with whom Clooney had an affair in the late 1950s. (She chronicled their relationship in her 1977 autobiography without naming names.) *Mothers and Daughters* (1997) includes a version of “Maria” from *West Side Story* sung to Clooney’s daughter Maria. (Clooney had five children in quick succession in the mid-1950s, and motherhood remained central to her persona across her career.) Clooney’s final album, a live recording

titled *The Last Concert* (2002), captures a November 2001 performance attended by many family and friends. The previous month, Apple had announced the imminent release of the first iPod, an innovation that would accelerate trends away from physical discs toward a pop music marketplace shaped by digital products, mostly singles. By historical happenstance, good luck, and good health, Clooney managed to make concept albums for almost the full length of the long-format era.

Clooney's Concord discography stands as a year-by-year record of a great singer using the long-format medium to preserve for posterity her way with a song, confident that grouping some classic pop tunes around a simple concept was still a good way to make a successful LP or CD. Clooney's quiet confidence in this approach, and the commitment of her record label to keep the series going, resulted in both a monument to American popular singing and evidence that the earliest solutions to the aesthetic challenge of the LP continued to work until the end of the long-format era.

The age of long-form listening is past. True, any later format can be used like the LP, and recording artists still make "albums," although albums for sale as downloads on the Internet are little more than suggested playlists available at a discount if purchased as a whole. As the CD slouches toward extinction, there is no way of knowing if long-format creativity will be a priority for younger artists and listeners, whose listening practices were not defined by sustained, set-order listening. The listener who longs for the long-format experience can simulate it, of course, although some research is necessary if historical formats are to be re-created in a twenty-first-century recorded music regime that has done away with liner notes and set orders, not to mention

the cover art that was so central to LP culture.

The material conditions that nourished long-form listening are all but gone, but the recordings – at least some of them – remain, repackaged as digital singles obtainable for 99¢, popping up randomly on a streaming service such as Pandora, or instantly accessible (and just as easily dismissible) on Spotify. These fragments and ghosts of the concept album in its early days still bring pleasure, but anyone who wants to experience this recorded legacy in a deeper fashion does well to set the needle in the longer LP groove – even if only symbolically – and let the creative musical meetings of an ended epoch live again in their entirety.

- 1 “Albums” of 78s – sets of related discs packaged in heavy, photo-album-like binders, often with specially designed cover art – were widely marketed beginning in the 1930s, and the high-end home audio equipment manufacturer Capehart sold phonographs that played multiple 78s in succession. So, it was technically possible to create a long-form listening experience. The LP not only streamlined the physical process, but also simplified the technological requirements for home listeners and lowered the entry-level cost for consumers wishing to enter the long-format market.
- 2 This tally includes a handful of studio and concert recordings of Broadway scores; see Joel Whitburn, *Top Pop Albums*, 7th ed. (Menomonee Falls, Wis.: Record Research Inc., 2010).
- 3 The LP was well suited to classical music, but classical recordings have never driven the recorded music market; they simply do not generate enough sales. Production of classical discs has always been under a kind of patronage: a label’s pop successes pay for the prestigious losses racked up by the classical division.
- 4 Audio cassettes, introduced in the early 1960s but gaining market share only in the early 1970s, reproduced the sidedness of LPs (sometimes rearranging the distribution of tracks), while also adding portability, especially with the introduction of the Walkman at the start of the 1980s. In some cases, tracks not included on the LP version of an album appeared on 8-track tape releases. The unreliable 8-track format never gained much traction in the marketplace. Unlike the inexactitude of the fast forward and rewind buttons on audio cassette players, use of which was said to harm the tape, 8-track players featured a skip button that moved the listener forward to a new section of the tape. However, 8-tracks did not have the shuffle capabilities of the CD. Cassettes, 8-tracks, and CDs were all ideal for use in cars. The Ultra-Glide, a phonograph mounted on the dashboard, attempted, without much success, to adapt 45 singles for automobile listening during the format’s late 1950s and 1960s heyday. No means to play LPs in the car was ever introduced commercially.
- 5 Other approaches to the early concept LP worth considering include discs made for social dancing in the home and personality-driven discs organized around individual performers. Social dance instructors Arthur Murray and Fred Astaire both released multiple discs intended to help listeners improve their skills with a particular style of dance – LPs of all rumbas or waltzes – and party discs that mixed tempos and dances, providing a soundtrack for good times in the home. My wife’s grandparents enjoyed dancing to such records in the finished basement of their home in 1950s Washington State. Comedian Jackie Gleason pioneered personality-driven instrumental discs in the early 1950s. Gleason’s artistic role in making the records remains unclear, but his success marketing mood music LPs crafted to display adult record buyers’ hi-fi home stereo systems lasted into the 1960s. Frank Sinatra’s concept LPs on Capitol Records, beginning with *Songs for Young Lovers* (1954), centered on the singer’s voice and masculine persona. As late as 1960, Sinatra was producing albums that charted at number one (*Nice ‘n’ Easy*). Sinatra made two types of discs: rhythm discs that set the mood for a swinging party (*Come Dance with Me!*, 1959) and ballad discs suggesting late night brooding over love lost (*In the Wee Small Hours*, 1955).
- 6 All the LPs discussed below are available for purchase as CD reissues and through digital download services such as iTunes and amazon.com. Another way to digitally sample these discs is via the (at present) free music streaming service Spotify, which can be searched by album title. Neither CDs nor online versions necessarily reflect the exact content or order of the original LPs and, of course, the break between sides A and B is obscured. In many cases, YouTube features selections from these discs posted by fans of the albums. Search by album title and artist name, always aware that tracks may be mislabeled and accompanying images may be wrong.
- 7 Early live LPs demonstrating a range of styles include *Ellington at Newport* (a 1956 disc that revived Duke Ellington’s career, though it was revealed in the 1990s to have actually been a mixture of live and studio performances, with crowd noises added for effect), *Judy at Carnegie Hall* (a 1961 double-LP of Judy Garland performing for an adoring crowd), and *Live*

at the Apollo (James Brown appearing in 1962 at the iconic theater in Harlem for a similarly vocal audience). Live discs featuring rock and roll musicians would, of course, follow these pioneering LPs.

- ⁸ For more on *The Astaire Story*, see Tad Hershorn, *Norman Granz: The Man Who Used Jazz for Justice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 170–172; and Todd Decker, *Music Makes Me: Fred Astaire and Jazz* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 315–320.
- ⁹ The original album art and liner notes were reproduced as well, but the miniature size of the CD relative to the LP made the homage perhaps more symbolic than useful.
- ¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of the making of the *Song Books*, see Hershorn, *Norman Granz*, 217–224 and 273–277; and Norman David, *The Ella Fitzgerald Companion* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2004), 107–133. Leslie Gourse collects media interviews and critical reactions to the discs in *The Ella Fitzgerald Companion: Seven Decades of Commentary* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1998), 51–108.
- ¹¹ Ellington’s transition to an LP artist brought forth a diverse series of concept albums. The success of *Ellington at Newport* reinvigorated Ellington’s career and led to a series of LPs for Columbia, allowing Ellington to record what he wanted. Among the discs of this period are *Such Sweet Thunder* (musical portraits of characters from Shakespeare by Ellington and Strayhorn), *Anatomy of a Murder* (a film score soundtrack album), *Ellington Indigos* (a Gleasonesque set of ballads in a sustained, bluesy mood), *At the Bal Masque* (described by Ellington scholar Eddie Lambert as a disc of “satirical pop,” each track framed with a fake applause track), the *Nutcracker Suite* (a disc’s worth of jazz renderings from Tchaikovsky’s perennial favorite), and “All American” in Jazz (jazz settings of songs from the score to the Broadway flop *All American*, part of a minor vogue for such discs). *Blue Rose* falls within this body of work created between 1956 and 1962, a period when Ellington sought a place in the adult long-form popular music market. For more on Ellington’s LP-making during these years, see Eddie Lambert, *Duke Ellington: A Listener’s Guide* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1999), 177–204 and 213–231.
- ¹² Rosemary Clooney, with Raymond Strait, *This For Remembrance: The Autobiography of Rosemary Clooney, An Irish-American Singer* (New York: Playboy Press, 1977), 178–180.
- ¹³ Clooney, Crosby, and May made a follow-up disc titled *That Travelin’ Two Beat* (Capitol Records, 1965).
- ¹⁴ To hear the three Clooney LPs discussed here in context with the singer’s larger career, see Bear Family Records’ retrospective anthology of Clooney’s complete recorded work from 1946 to 1968, in chronological order on twenty-two CDs divided into three box sets.
- ¹⁵ Clooney, *This For Remembrance*.

Long Time, No Song: Revisiting Fats Waller's Lost Broadway Musical

John H. McWhorter

Abstract: Just before he died in 1943, Fats Waller wrote the music for a Broadway book musical with a mostly white cast, the first black composer to do so – and the only one ever to do it with commercial success. Yet “Early to Bed” is largely ignored by historians of musical theater, while jazz scholars describe the circumstances surrounding its composition rather than the work itself. Encouraging this neglect is the fact that no actual score survives. This essay, based on research that assembled all surviving evidence of the score and the show, gives a summary account of “Early to Bed” and what survives from it. The aim is to fill a gap in Waller scholarship, calling attention to some of his highest quality work, and possibly stimulating further reconstruction work that might result in a recording of the score.

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In 1943 and 1944, if tickets to musicals such as *Oklahoma!*, *One Touch of Venus*, or *A Connecticut Yankee* were elusive, the theatergoer could drop in on another hit running at the time. *Early to Bed* was a musical about white people with a score by a black man – the first such musical on Broadway.¹ It was one of only three ever, and the only one that was a success. (The other two were Duke Ellington's short-lived *Beggar's Holiday* and *Pousse-Cafe*.) It played for a year, a healthy and profitable run for a show in 1943, before then touring the country. And the composer of this show was none other than Fats Waller.

Yet *Early to Bed* is a footnote in histories of musical theater. Even the dedicated musical theater aficionado has typically never heard of it. Playwright and theater historian Thomas Hischak, in his *Oxford Companion to the American Musical*, includes no entry for the show; and in the general entry on Waller that he does include, there is still no mention of *Early to Bed*.

There is temptation to attribute this omission to race-related bias, but in truth, *Early to Bed* does not appear in this or other histories of musical theater

because, like most musicals of its time, it was intended as a passing entertainment. Historians of musical theater tend to focus on productions that pushed the form forward. In an era when Broadway musicals were produced almost as prolifically as television shows came to be in later periods, for every *Show Boat* there were two or three bread-and-butter shows that came and went unremembered.

Even the fanatic can draw a blank on the titles of similarly unambitious productions from *Early to Bed*'s era, such as *Beat the Band* (1942) or *Follow the Girls* (1944). And while the tradition of recording original cast albums began the year *Early to Bed* opened, at first only the very longest running, or at least the most prestigious, musicals were considered worth the investment. In 1943, for example, even a solid hit like *Something for the Boys*, with a Cole Porter score and starring Ethel Merman, was not recorded as an album.

We might expect jazz scholars at least to take interest in *Early to Bed*. However, except for Paul Machlin's invaluable description of some early Waller manuscripts for the score, these scholars have given the show little attention.² Waller draws interest as a musician because of his performance ability; *Early to Bed*, which depends on Waller's work as performed by others, doesn't fit this pattern. Moreover, jazz scholars' interest in musical theater focuses on shows from the 1920s, when the synergy between black jazz and the stage was most intimate—shows such as the 1929 black revue *Hot Chocolates*, which Waller wrote the score for and which featured Louis Armstrong on trumpet. *Early to Bed*, a white musical playing fifteen years later and just down the street from *Oklahoma!*, elicits less interest by comparison.

Finally, a theater or jazz fan who did find himself interested in *Early to Bed* would be hindered by the sad fact that

while almost every known Waller recording is extant and available on CD, no score of *Early to Bed* survives. Sheet music for six of the thirteen songs was published, but a few dozen bars of music is a pale reflection of how a song was performed on stage. Evidence of the rest of the score exists only in scattered fragments.

The neglect of *Early to Bed*, then, is understandable. Yet my long-standing curiosity as to what a mainstream Broadway musical by Fats Waller in 1943 was like, whetted further by a small-scale revival of the show in 2009 by the Musicals Tonight! company in New York City, has inspired me to bring together all of the surviving evidence of the score and the show.

The project is imperative for four reasons. First, the score was of great significance to Waller; and second, the score was a signature assignment for a black musician of the era: for these reasons alone, the obscurity of *Early to Bed* leaves a gap in our evaluation of Waller's legacy. Third, research reveals that *Early to Bed*, for all its broad colors, was as musically delightful as we would expect material written by Waller at the height of his creative powers to be. Fourth, however, *Early to Bed* was the beginning of what would almost certainly have been a new direction in Waller's creative output: namely, writing for the musical stage. Had Waller not died in 1943, his example might have inspired and paved the way for other black musicians to create musical theater works. Broadway might have seen a reiteration of the "Black Broadway" flowerings that had occurred in the very early 1900s and the 1920s.

Occasional forays into musical theater were as central to Waller's career as the recordings he is best known for today. More of this career took place in Harlem venues than on Broadway, with shows

such as *Tan Town Topics* and *Junior Blackbirds* (both in 1926) and *Load of Coal* (1929). *Keep Shufflin'* (1929), a "book show" (that is, with a narrative) sequel to Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle's legendary *Shuffle Along* (1921), did appear on Broadway, but Waller split the composing chores with his stride-pianist mentor, James P. Johnson. *Hot Chocolates* (1929), a revue that introduced "Ain't Misbehavin'" and "Black and Blue," was the one show composed only by Waller that had played Broadway before *Early to Bed*.

Even by 1943, however, a black composer writing the score for a standard-issue white book show was unheard of. When Broadway performer and producer Richard Kollmar (1910–1971) began planning *Early to Bed*, his original idea was for Waller to perform in the show, not write the music for it. Kollmar thus did not set out to produce "a Fats Waller musical." Rather, he had just had a flop with the now forgotten *Beat the Band* (mentioned above), and *Early to Bed* was meant to be a rollicking concoction that would make a profit.

For a lyricist, Kollmar tapped George Marion, Jr. (1899–1968), who had scripted successful films such as *Love Me Tonight* (1932), with its trailblazingly tight integration of music and narrative, and the Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers vehicle *The Gay Divorcée*. Kollmar had earlier recruited Marion to write both script and lyrics for *Beat the Band*, so he would therefore seem a natural choice for *Early to Bed*. Waller biographer Joel Vance bills Marion as "a literate and worldly lyricist,"³ but Marion's lyrics are more aptly described as grandiloquently lusty: consider the *Beat the Band* song titles "Free, Cute and Size Fourteen" and "I'm Physical, You're Cultured."⁴

It is easy to see why recruiting Waller as the composer did not first occur to Kollmar, but it is less clear why his original

choice was Ferde Grofe, who was best known as the orchestrator of George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, and whose signature compositions were portentous concert suites.⁵ After Grofe withdrew from the show in March 1943, Kollmar realized that Waller was a readily available replacement and gave him a \$1,000 advance for his composing chores.⁶

It was thus fortuitous that Waller ended up as Broadway's first black composer for a white book show, and similarly fortuitous that, ultimately, he was solely the composer and not also a performer in the show. During a cash crisis, Waller called Kollmar in the wee hours after drinking heavily, threatening to leave the production unless allowed to sell Kollmar the rights to all of his *Early to Bed* music for a quick extra \$1,000. Waller came to his senses the next day, but Kollmar decided that his drinking habits made him too risky a proposition for performing eight times a week.

From that point, Waller was the show's composer only. It bears mentioning, however, that solely from a modern perspective is *Early To Bed's* most notable aspect Waller's music. Waller was enough of a national figure by the 1940s to be caricatured in a Warner Bros. cartoon like *Tin Pan Alley Cats*, but ultimately he was considered what would have been called a "Negro entertainer." Reviewers of *Early to Bed* gave no indication that they considered Waller's participation particularly relevant. The show was processed and publicized not as Waller's venture, but as Kollmar's.

The music and lyrics of *Early to Bed* were largely written separately. Waller appears to have written most of the melodies first. In manuscripts of Waller's work on *Early to Bed* (in the Victor Amerling collection, discussed below), some melodies have dummy titles ("Slightly Less Than Won-

derful" is "Horse in Blue"; "Long Time, No Song" is "Twilight"), others are labeled generically ("Martinique" is first "New Latin Song"), and first versions of melodies do not match the final lyrics, showing that Waller was not working from prewritten words. (For example, the manuscripts show a full early version of "There's a Man in My Life" that does not scan rhythmically to the published one.) The creative process involved some in-person collaboration; Marion's daughter Georgette recalls Waller visiting the Marions' apartment often during the months before the premiere to work with her father.

Rehearsals for the show began on April 22, 1943.⁷ Kollmar gathered a reputed 109 backers for the show, including Milton Berle and the Stork Club's famous owner, Sherman Billingsley.⁸ The show premiered in Boston on May 24. Waller took the train to Boston with his second wife, Anita, and his son Maurice early that day; upon arrival, he contacted his saxophonist/singer friend Joey Nash, who had an extended gig in the city, and brought him to a bar with a piano to show off his tunes for the show. Nash recalled: "He was excited about every song, stopping to repeat, again and again, phrases and chords he particularly fancied . . . filling the room with etudes of ecstasy, sentimental songs and rocking riffs. *Early to Bed* was a triumph for Fats, every song was a gem."⁹

Waller was nevertheless so anxious about the reception of his music that he fortified himself with Old Granddad bourbon before settling in with the audience that evening for the second act.¹⁰ His worry was unnecessary. The Boston reviews, while harrumphing in grand old Boston style about the raunchier aspects of the show, were largely approving, and the run was extended by two weeks, until June 12.¹¹

Waller, however, was absent for the extended run, following an experience with the segregation still prevalent in 1943 even as far north as Boston. When Waller arrived at the hotel where his manager had reserved a room for him, the clerk insisted that no such reservation had been made and that no rooms were left. The Wallers met the same reception at all the other Boston hotels, and as a result, the composer of a new hit musical comedy ended up in a fetid flophouse. Waller quickly returned to New York, spending the rest of the Boston run busy with a gig in Philadelphia.

As was common in the era, Boston censors required that the "bluer" aspects of the show be toned down. The setting was changed from a whorehouse to a casino, the prostitutes became "hostesses," about two dozen lines were dropped, and the second verse of the title song, with its references to King Solomon settling in with a nightly concubine and Noel Coward slipping into "something flowered," was excised.¹² *Early to Bed* went on to premiere in New York on June 17. With ticket prices ranging from \$1.10 to \$4.40,¹³ the show ran until May 13, 1944, for a total of 380 performances.

In the wake of *Oklahoma!*, the plots of even lighter musical comedies were expected to evidence basic coherence and a relatively specific integration of music with narrative. However, *Early to Bed* was created just before that revolution in standards of evaluation, and therefore its plot is more generously viewed as an extended sketch rather than as a "story." It is clear from the two surviving copies of the script – a final one amidst George Marion's papers and an earlier draft held by the New York Public Library – that the aim was simply to amuse while leaving space for Waller's songs, which decorated the proceedings rather than moving them

forward. The overall feel is reminiscent of variety show skits on television in the 1950s through 1970s.

Early to Bed begins with an aging bullfighter's car breaking down in Martinique, where he, along with his son and his black valet, has traveled in hopes of a comeback at the Pan-American Goodwill Games being held there. The son is hit by a car and then taken to convalesce at the Angry Pigeon whorehouse, run by a former schoolteacher named Rowena. The woman driving, a nightclub dancer on her way to a gig, convalesces alongside the son and the two fall in love. Meanwhile, the bullfighter, El Magnifico, and Rowena turn out to have had a fling in the past and consider rekindling it, while black valet Pooch and Rowena's black maid Lily-Ann also feel a connection.

All of the newcomers except Eileen, a newly hired prostitute, assume that the Angry Pigeon is a finishing school, and Rowena opts not to disabuse them of this belief in order not to discourage the affections of El Magnifico. Soon, the California State University track team passes through town for the Goodwill Games, and out of public spirit, El Magnifico diverts them to stay at the "finishing school" as well. In a similar spirit, El Magnifico arranges for the prostitutes to build a float and display themselves on it during the Games, propelled by the track team. Their exertions in this effort and with the ladies cause them to lose the Games. However, the U.S. president congratulates the team for their touching magnanimity in letting other countries win, which leads the mayor in Martinique to acknowledge Rowena and her establishment for making the commendation possible. All couples are united.

Starring as El Magnifico was Kollmar himself in tawny makeup. Reviews suggest that his portrait of an aging Spaniard was convincing and his singing excellent,

not surprising given that he had introduced the standard "It Never Was You" in the Kurt Weill score for *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1938) and Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart's "I Didn't Know What Time It Was" in *Too Many Girls* (1939). Rowena was the British actress Muriel Angelus, who contemporary audiences would have remembered for introducing "Falling in Love with Love" in Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart's *The Boys from Syracuse* (1938); she is most easily seen today in the Preston Sturges film classic *The Great McGinty* (1940) as McGinty's wife. Her staid quality would have served as an elegant counterpoint to Rowena's occupation. Pablo was Russian-born actor George Zoritch, cast for his dancing ability – he had headlined in the Ballet Russe – and good looks. Reviewers wanly praised his talent in a part requiring speaking and singing. Playing against him was Jane Deering as Lois. She was also primarily a dancer, and she complemented Zoritch in physical beauty, as attested to by production photos held at the New York Public Library as well as one in the possession of George Marion's daughter Georgette.

Eileen, the new prostitute, was played by Jane Kean. In an Associated Press review from June 19, 1943, J. M. Kendrick deemed her, with an enthusiasm typical of other reviews, "[o]ne of the most promising comedienne since Ethel Merman came to the fore." Only 20 years of age, Kean was later best known for playing Trixie in Jackie Gleason's *Honeymooners* franchise, taking over for Joyce Randolph after the famous thirty-five filmed half-hour episodes. In place of Waller, Bob Howard played the role of Pooch. Howard was a black singer-pianist entertainer who had been promoted by the Decca recording company as direct competition to Waller in the 1930s. His casting was perfect; film clips of his jazz performances

reveal a virtual imitation of Waller's sound and mannerisms. Lily-Ann was portrayed by Jeni Le Gon – called “a fine, noisy mulatto girl” in a *New Yorker* review of June 6, 1943 – who had sung and danced with Waller's band. (“I did flips and knee drops and toe stands and all that sort of business,” she later recounted.)¹⁴ Harold “Stumpy” Cromer, who lived until shortly before the publication of this essay, as did Le Gon, played the dancing character Caddy. Maurice Ellis as a gendarme and David Bethea as a gardener were the other two black performers, cast generically as Martiniquans.

In line with the centrality of prostitution to the plot, *Early to Bed* was openly randy in tone. Deemed too bawdy for young son Maurice Waller to see,¹⁵ the show was subtitled “A Fable for Grown-ups” and judged to be “An Oversexed Musical” by the *Chicago Daily News* during the national tour. The script, designated a “one-joke farce” by writer Ethan Mordden,¹⁶ dwells endlessly in elliptical references to sex: in the second act, the girls' float costumes are announced according to the lubriciously allusive labels “Inter-American Naval Accord,” “The Liberated Areas,” “The Spirit of Global Uplift,” and “All Out for Hemisphere Defense.”

That sequence was a symptom of the fact that *Early to Bed* was as much a visual statement as an aural one; “On the whole it is for those who take their musical comedy by eye rather than ear,” Lewis Nichols wrote, albeit with little musical acumen, in the June 17 edition of *The New York Times*. George C. Jenkins' sets alone elicited applause from first-nighters; on the national tour in Chicago, “a good natured audience waited more or less patiently while the stage crew hung the delayed scenery, which reciprocated by being one of the show's major assets,” wrote Claudia Cassidy in a review from August 28, 1944. Broadway veteran Miles

White's costumes were, according to Burns Mantle at the *Daily News*, “brilliant and sparse,” while the dances were by Robert Alton, who had choreographed countless hits on Broadway, including *Anything Goes* (1934), and who later choreographed such hit films as *Good News* (1947). The female chorus included four top models of the day – Louise Jarvis, Choo-Choo Johnson, Peggy Cordray, and Angela Green – who were endlessly covered in publicity for the show. *Early to Bed* was indeed a sight to see.

As to what it was like to hear, six of *Early to Bed's* thirteen songs were published as sheet music. “Slightly Less Than Wonderful” and “This is So Nice” were romantic duet fox trots, both performed by Waller on “V-disc” recordings made for the armed forces. The silky and flirtatious “Wonderful” was sung by the young lovers Pablo and Lois, presumably followed by an extended dance, as Zoritch and Deering were primarily dancers. There clearly were high hopes for the song, as it was quickly reprised by the black couple and the three black chorus members in a second saltier refrain, including the couplet “Within me elemental forces surge / Are you allergic to the orgy urge?” In his recording, Waller sings this refrain. (Despite Paul Machlin's surmise that it may have been written by Waller's frequent collaborator, Andy Razaf,¹⁷ the Marion papers reveal a typed version of this lyric, intended for Pooch and Lily-Ann.) “This Is So Nice (It Must Be Illegal)” was sung by El Magnifico and Rowena.

Also published were the two songs sung and danced by Howard and Le Gon, “Hi-De-Ho High in Harlem” and “When the Nylons Bloom Again.” The latter is one of two *Early to Bed* songs well known today, largely because of their inclusion in the megahit Waller revue *Ain't Misbehavin'* (1978). The other is “The Ladies

Who Sing with the Band,” which Waller also recorded, a comment on how physique can trump vocal chops for the aspiring female pop singer. As in *Ain't Misbehavin'*, this song served as a frame in *Early to Bed* for performance interludes satirizing pop singers of the era. The number was sung in front of a prop microphone by Rowena, Eileen, Lois, and Rowena's assistant, Jessica, with the proceedings culminating in a physical melee (depicted in one of the production photos). Reviews regularly cited “Ladies” as one of the highlights of the show, eliciting encores; but the brief sheet music gives no indication of the arrangement, who was imitated in the interludes, or the spoken lines, all of which made a bigger number out of the song. However, programs record that the parodied songs were “Jim,” “You Made Me Love You,” “Love is the Sweetest Thing,” “Wanting You,” “Love Me or Leave Me,” “All of Me,” “Love, Your Magic Spell is Everywhere,” “That Old Black Magic,” “I Want My Mama,” “Oh, Johnny, Oh,” and “What is This Thing Called Love.”

Finally, the ballad “There's a Man in My Life” was sung by Rowena early in the show. Waller recorded it as “There's a Girl in My Life,” and it is the only song from the show that has courted the status of cabaret standard, recorded by Pearl Bailey, Sylvia Syms, and Patti Page.

Waller recorded one other *Early to Bed* song, but only as an instrumental: “Martinique,” alternately known as “There's ‘Yes’ in the Air.” This is a highly infectious Latin melody (never mind that Martinique is a Francophone island!) with a very clever lyric (with two-and-a-half refrains) by Marion about the pliant mood the island puts one in: “They keep a mine-sweeper near / Just to sweep up discarded brassieres here / If you're inclined to undress / There is yes in the air in Martinique.” It would surely be better known

today if the show had been recorded or Waller had lived longer to publicize it. “Martinique” kicked off an elaborate first-act ballet finale, also regularly cited as a highlight of the show, presumably with dance music by Baldwin Bergerson, credited for “ballet music.”

One song exists in hand-written holograph but was not published: “Long Time, No Song” is a lush ballad that served as *El Magnifico* and Rowena's second-act love song. The title song “Early To Bed,” with a warmly pleasing melody and naughtily clever lyrics, was sung by Rowena's assistant Jessica and the coach to warn the track team away from carnal dalliance in the second act. It was recorded once, by jazz pianist Brooks Kerr in the early eighties, who in July 2013 told the author that he worked from a tape of Waller playing it, now lost.

Four *Early to Bed* songs were neither published nor recorded and do not exist even in unpublished holographs. Only their lyrics survive, partially, in the final script. For the 2009 revival, the *Musicals Tonight!* staff located the original production's Harold “Stumpy” Cromer, a veteran tap dancer who also played the Pooch part in the road tour, and asked him to recall these songs to the best of his ability. “A Girl Who Doesn't Ripple When She Bends” was a calisthenics sequence led by Rowena's assistant, segueing into a dance number with the character Cromer played (pictured in one of the surviving photos). “Me and My Old World Charm” was a character song by *El Magnifico* in which he recounts his romantic successes, often cited in reviews as one of the show's more memorable moments. Some reviews suggest that Rowena joined *Magnifico* in singing the song. A discovery of the actual “Supple Couple” would be especially welcome, as this is the one song in *Early to Bed* that was relatively integrated into the plot, layering three running com-

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ments on Pablo and Lois's convalescence and good looks by Jessica and Lily-Ann, Pooch, and El Magnifico (strangely concerned that all know that Pablo's underwear are of highest quality). "Get Away, Young Man" opens the second act as a comment by the ladies to the track team.

While the approximations created by the Musicals Tonight! team and Mr. Cromer are an absolutely precious feat of archaeology, sixty-five years inevitably filters recollection to the point that these versions of the songs lack the Waller stamp. The brevity of the recovered "Me and My Old World Charm" suggests particular attrition, as it is repeatedly described as a grand *tour de force* in reviews, one of which (from *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 4, 1944) even mentions a lyric – "In Madrid they went mad, in Cadiz it was just as bad" – that is now lost, likely along with much more material.

Working drafts of *Early to Bed* material are part of a collection of papers currently held by Victor Amerling, son of the lawyer who Waller's son Maurice employed; the collection includes manuscripts of four songs not used in the show. The up-tempo "That Does It" was also recorded by Waller, who played it on piano, on a private acetate recording. Also surviving are melodies titled "Take It From Here" and "I'm Getting Nowhere." I have also identified in these papers a melody originally intended for the Jessica character, a lovely ballad titled "I'm Dreaming," apparently from an earlier incarnation of the plot in which she had a love interest. Meanwhile, the Marion papers include a lyric without a known melody, "Men," apparently intended for a Mexican female character absent from the final script, while programs for the Boston tryout reveal a song that was eliminated before the New York run called "On Your Mark."

Waller was often said to spin off melodies effortlessly. However, the Amerling

papers reveal that Waller's creative process involved considerable experimentation. The manuscripts include alternate endings for the song "Slightly Less Than Wonderful" (as previously documented by Paul Machlin); later discarded bridge sections for the title song "Early to Bed" as well as "When the Nylons Bloom Again" and "Martinique"; and early versions of "There's a Man in My Life," "Long Time, No Song," "Hi-De-Ho High in Harlem," "Me and My Old World Charm," "Get Away, Young Man," and "A Girl Who Doesn't Ripple When She Bends" (titled "One-Two" in the manuscript, after the first words of its lyric).

Because original performance materials for *Early to Bed* are lost, we cannot hear how Waller's songs were arranged or orchestrated. However, we know that the head orchestrator was Don Walker, who helped create the "Broadway sound" in his work on countless musicals such as *Carousel* (1945), *The Pajama Game* (1954), and *Cabaret* (1966). Theater reviewers rarely attend to orchestration in any substantial way, but *Times* critic Lewis Nichols's comment that Walker "understands the trumpets of Waller and the drums of Martinique," and the frequent description of the show's musical ambience as "loud," leads us to assume that Waller's music was dressed up in Walker's typically sumptuous style, assisted by Ted Royal and Robert Noeltner, likely on less important songs, dance music, and transitions.¹⁸ Choral arrangements were by the dependable Clay Warnick.

After it closed on Broadway, *Early to Bed* toured with an almost completely new cast (none of especial prominence). The near-vaudevillian nature of the script is evidenced by the fact that the actor who took over the coach role, Mervyn Nelson, brought in a skit unconnected with the plot. He mugged Bert Lahr-style through

a depiction of a P.T.A. meeting – an addition that was regularly cited as a highlight of the show.¹⁹

Following the tour, the conductor's score and orchestra parts were lost to the winds. Before the institutionalization of musical theater as an art form, musical comedies were considered topical and evanescent. No one in 1943 had any idea that anyone even one year later, let alone seventy, might want to hear the songs from *Early to Bed* at all, much less in the arrangements as they were originally presented. For hits that had especially long runs or that benefited from a revival, original materials tended to survive. *Early to Bed's* purpose as a passing fancy, however, discouraged preservation of the show's materials for later retrieval.

In December 1943, six months into *Early to Bed's* Broadway run, Waller suffered a bout of flu and bronchitis while touring the West Coast and died of pneumonia on the train ride back East. Kollmar delivered a tribute to Waller at his funeral. The timing of Waller's death was especially unfortunate; although this fact is scarcely stressed in Waller biographies, writing for Broadway would likely have been the next act in his life.

Work for traveling bands, such as the one Waller made much of his living from, began drying up quickly just a few years after he died. Today we savor his film appearances, especially in *Stormy Weather* (1943), but as spellbinding as Waller was on film, cameos and subsidiary roles were all that a black comic and musician would have been able to achieve in mainstream cinema of the 1940s and 1950s. Once television came along, perhaps Waller would have landed his own show. He had hosted a successful radio show in the 1930s, and it was none other than *Early to Bed's* Bob Howard who, in 1948, became the first black host of a television show. Waller

could easily have been sought for that job, or a similar one, if he had lived. Still, it is likely that such a gig would have lasted only so long, given that black performers at the time elicited limited interest from the American viewing public and wan commitment from networks and sponsors.

Broadway offered Waller much more promise. The high quality of the melodies in *Early to Bed* alone demonstrates his potential as a Broadway hit-maker. Waller's gift for melody is equal to that of esteemed Broadway composers whose stars rose after World War II, such as Richard Adler and Jerry Ross, Jule Styne, or Harold Rome, and is superior to that of many composers less successful on Broadway, such as Morton Gould and Robert Emmett Dolan.

Waller, then, could have had further hit shows. Kollmar thought so; he had been negotiating with Waller to compose for either a white show with Libby Holman and Jack White (as reported in *Billboard* magazine in September 1943) or a black show.²⁰ As more musicals were recorded as cast albums, such recordings would have cemented Waller's new status as a musical theater composer. Even the evolution of musical theater in the 1940s and beyond would have complemented Waller's own development. As theater scores explored an increasingly broad range of emotions, Waller could have found an outlet for his yearning later in life to pursue more serious directions in his music. His acetate recording of the up-tempo, unused *Early to Bed* song "That Does It," for example, has an unexpectedly quiet, trailing coda, a mood and contrast that would have been effectively applied to the kinds of character songs Broadway composers were beginning to write at the time.²¹

In a broader sense, on Broadway in the 1940s to 1960s, black artists had all but no creative presence beyond performing, in

contrast to the work of Will Marion Cook, Bob Cole and the Johnson brothers, Eubie Blake, Noble Sissle, and so many others before World War II. Musicals by Waller would have altered this situation, and in his wake, other black musicians might well have been inspired to experiment with the form. Just as likely, white producers would have actively sought out such talent in a quest to channel Waller's success. Duke Ellington might have been offered more projects and gotten luckier than he did with the experimental failures *Beggar's Holiday* and *Pousse-Café*. Rhythm and blues composers like Louis Jordan could also have transferred their abilities to stage music (instead of, in his case, having his music reach the stage only in the 1990s through the anthology revue *Five Guys Named Moe*).

In other words, *Early to Bed*, so forgotten today, could have marked the beginning of an important moment in the development of American theater music; it could have opened opportunities for black musicians in an era when slow but steady civil rights victories were making integration ever more a reality in American life. Instead, fate had it that *Early to Bed* was the end of a story, not the beginning.

That ending should at least be more available to those interested in Waller's legacy, as well as in good theater music more generally. Ideal would be a recording of the score's songs, newly scored for orchestra in period style and possibly bolstered in places by other lesser-known but effective Waller songs worthy of a new airing (such as for the pastiches in "The Ladies Who Sing with the Band"). Also, archivists, collectors, and hoarders across America should be on notice for manuscripts of the four missing songs from the score, and just possibly a copy of the score itself.

Waller should have the last word. On his recording of "Slightly Less Than Won-

derful" near the end of his life, Waller starts out with "Now, boys, I'm gonna give you a couple of tunes from my show *Early to Bed*, a *fine* show on Broadway that pays my cathouse dues, you know? I can't kid no more, but hold everything – here 'tis!" If only today we could say, "Here 'tis!" – a complete score for the study and enjoyment of Waller and his work.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank the various people who have given access to remaining evidence of *Early to Bed*: Mel Miller, David Bishop, and Rick Hop-Flores of Musicals Tonight! for the script and their reconstructions of the lost songs; Victor Amerling for the working manuscripts bequeathed to him by his father; Jeremy McGraw at the Billy Rose Theatre Division of the New York Public Library for pointing me to the collection of photographs of the production and an early draft of the script in the library's collection; Georgette Marion for access to her father's papers (as well as one production photograph not held by the New York Public Library); and Waller expert Paul Machlin. Thanks also to the staff at the New York Public Library for their patience in locating the temporarily misclassified clippings file for the show, from which I derive much of the information about the show's publicity, reviews, and touring production.

Basic information on major participants and events connected to the show's creation are derived from overlapping accounts in the Waller biographies *Fats Waller*, by Maurice Waller with Anthony Calabrese (New York: Schirmer, 1977); *Ain't Misbehavin'*, by Ed Kirkeby with Duncan P. Schiedt and Sinclair Traill (London: Davies, 1966); *Fats Waller: His Life and Times*, by Joel Vance (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1977); and *Fats Waller: The Cheerful Little Earful*, by Alyn Shipton (London: Continuum, 1988).

- 1 J. Rosamond Johnson composed the music for *Hello, Paris*, which ran briefly in 1911; but this was a revue (and an abbreviated one) rather than a book show.
- 2 Paul Machlin, *Thomas "Fats" Waller: Performances in Transcription* (Middleton, Wisc.: A-R Editions, 2001).
- 3 Joel Vance, *Fats Waller: His Life and Times* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1977), 49.
- 4 A useful source for lists of Broadway musicals' songs is the Internet Broadway Data Base, <http://www.ibdb.com>.
- 5 *Early to Bed* clippings file, New York Public Library.
- 6 Vance, *Fats Waller*, 147.
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- 8 *Ibid.*
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- 15 Waller, *Fats Waller*, 157.
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- 18 Steven Suskin, *The Sound of Broadway Music: A Book of Orchestrators and Orchestrations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 378–379.
- 19 *Early to Bed* clippings file, New York Public Library.
- 20 Charles Fox, *Fats Waller* (London: Cassell, 1960), 73.
- 21 This recording can be listened to on YouTube.

A New Kind of Blue: The Power of Suggestion & the Pleasure of Groove in Robert Glasper's *Black Radio*

Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr.

Abstract: This essay places the important Robert Glasper Experiment recording "Black Radio" (2012) within its artistic, commercial, and critical contexts. As a project that combines genres, "Black Radio" did more than challenge different communities of listeners; it invited them to see how Glasper's sonic juxtapositions could be logically aligned. Jazz, hip-hop, R&B, and gospel merge in "Black Radio" to form a stylish, forward-looking contribution that won popular and critical successes. Glasper and his ensemble toy with the social contracts that have established boundaries around sonic language; indeed, he makes their territories feel seamless and natural. Because of the success of the project, we may be witnessing a post-genre moment that disrupts traditional ideas about music that have been preciously held in the industry since it emerged in the late-nineteenth century.

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“Changing the game!” exclaimed the press photographer at pianist Robert Glasper’s standing-room-only appearance at World Café Live in Philadelphia in the spring of 2012. “Yeah, no doubt,” a middle-aged man shot back in enthusiastic agreement. The mid-sized auditorium was filled with an interracial, intergenerational crowd of listeners enveloped in the mesh of sound worlds that Glasper presented with both commitment and ease.

The audience’s enthusiasm for the Robert Glasper Experiment’s landmark 2012 release *Black Radio* (Blue Note) – and its accompanying promotional tour – was affirmed by the American music industry’s arbiters of taste. To much surprise, *Black Radio* received a Grammy Award nomination in two categories: Best R&B Performance for “Gonna Be Alright (F.T.B.),” featuring Ledisi; and Best R&B Album. Even before it debuted, there was steady buzz about what the recording’s aesthetic approach and its critical reception might mean to the future of jazz. Now, in the wake of its release, it is

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clear that *Black Radio*'s influence extends well beyond the jazz world, as evidenced by the R&B branding. Like Miles Davis's pivotal 1959 album *Kind of Blue*, which signaled a new direction for modern jazz, *Black Radio* may indeed qualify as a game changer.

N*New York Times* music critic Nate Chinen wrote that *Black Radio* was "the rare album of its kind that doesn't feel strained by compromise or plagued by problems of translation."¹ Such a synthesis of styles is quite a feat given that jazz, R&B, and hip-hop have developed dissimilar social contracts with audiences, a chasm made glaringly clear by hip-hop's emergence as a commodity in the 1980s and the almost contemporaneous "young lions" movement that shot Wynton Marsalis and his co-conspirators of young, mostly male jazz musicians to stardom. In public and private discourse, these neo-classicist hard boppers were pitted against the sample-filled digital soundscapes of hip-hop producers ("they are not even 'real' musicians") and their rapping, rhyming counterparts ("they are *really* not musicians"). Although some critics could engage with each of these sound worlds, many listeners remained wedged between polarizing aesthetic discussions that inspired a politics of division.

That was the 1980s. Dramatic changes in the recording industry over the last fifteen years have opened up new creative opportunities for artists, and musicians are taking full advantage of them. Talented independent engineers and producers, armed with relatively high-quality personal recording studios, have increased exponentially; it's now a literal cottage industry. And because of the digital revolution, which provided cost-effective access to cutting-edge technologies, many musicians have become astute in engineering and production in addition to

their more traditional competencies in composition and performance, as well as in marketing and promotion. This newfound freedom has allowed ambitious musicians and producers to break out of genre boxes and craft conceptually adventurous projects. Some creators intentionally share their work free-of-charge on the social media sites Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube before they actually "drop" through traditional commercial avenues. Many recordings appear only in these online outlets and attract thousands of listeners without the help of a record label.

A new music economy has been established, in which record and marketing executives no longer exclusively determine what music is entitled to widespread dissemination. One of the most exciting results of this shift is that informal musical collectives have begun to work across genre lines (those imaginary sonic boundaries that exclude more than they invite), creating new audience alliances as well. Although he is contracted with Blue Note, the label historically associated with "straight-ahead" jazz, Glasper proves himself in his latest release to be in the avant-garde of this exciting new aesthetic wave.

That is not to say that there are not sonic precursors to *Black Radio*'s appealing new sounds. Chinen's article mentions a few such milestone performers: Miles Davis, Guru, A Tribe Called Quest, De La Soul, and Roy Hargrove. Each artist/group has produced projects that blend elements of jazz with those of other popular styles. We can push the list back further in time to include innovators like pianist Ramsey Lewis, the father of "soul-jazz," who has continued to build a vibrant career sliding effortlessly across the jazz/pop continuum. The clear-headed and creative adventurer Herbie Hancock, too, stands as a towering inspiration to genre-crossing artists, both in spirit and in technical execution.

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And we must not overlook, as is all too often the practice, the important women contributors to this aesthetic shape-shifting sensibility. Gospel great Elbernita “Twinkie” Clark’s songwriting, singing, and Hammond B-3 playing did much to set that genre on an unapologetic and sonically ecumenical path throughout the 1980s and beyond. Pianist and composer Patrice Rushen’s work boasted a prescient eclecticism that surely provided neo-soul rhythm and acid jazz tracks some of their harmonic approaches. Bassist and songwriter Meshell Ndegeocello’s virtuosic musicianship and fluency in hip-hop, pop, funk, soul, and jazz – and the singular and courageous way she combines the genres – must be considered a signpost in this discussion.

As a subject of written criticism and promotion, as a live performance event, and as a recording, *Black Radio* deserves our careful attention. But precisely what part of the *Black Radio* project suggests that we are in the midst of a post-genre moment, a wholesale realignment of the traditional social contracts governing music creation, dissemination, and consumption in the industry? *Black Radio*’s sense of aesthetic balance – of getting it just right – is key to our understanding, and it may be derived from two provocative musical choices: 1) a self-conscious foregrounding of digital technology in the soundscape, including tricked-out mixes and effects, among other techniques; and 2) a harmonic palette drawn from the progressive post-bop vocabulary, featuring close, infectious harmonies that pivot around common tones and shifting tonal centers. The songs are otherwise characterized by the careful alignment of sonic symbols from across the historical black popular music soundscape. Here, Glasper’s aesthetic strategy positions him to assuage the traditionalist

criticism of his dual pedigree in hip-hop and jazz, while also providing ample space for experimentation.

Beginning with an impressive set of trio recordings in the tradition of, most obviously, bebop pianist Bud Powell (always a litmus test for the modern jazz pianist), Glasper’s recorded output gradually moved into other conceptual and sonic territories. Brands are powerful entities, particularly in the music industry. Although he claims roots in gospel, R&B, jazz, and hip-hop, Glasper entered into public awareness as a “jazz pianist,” and it is hard to break away from that rubric once it sticks. The same is true for any artist whose work is marketed in a system that makes money from rigid predictability. This “agreement” becomes a social contract that ultimately seeks to dictate what artists produce, how companies sell content, and the spending and listening habits of specific demographics. Although Glasper was branded as a jazz musician, he has also maintained highly visible collaborations with the revered hip-hop producer and beat-maker J Dilla (James Dewitt Yancey) and the rapper Q-Tip (of the critically acclaimed group A Tribe Called Quest).

What we think of as the essence of jazz today developed during the 1940s bebop revolution. As historian Scott DeVeaux has explained:

In the wake of bebop, we no longer think of jazz improvisation as a way of playing tunes but as an exacting art form in itself that happens, as a rule, to use popular music as a point of departure. In the hands of a jazz improviser, a copyrighted popular song is less text than pretext. Its crucial identifying feature – melody – is erased in the heat of improvisation, leaving behind the more abstract and malleable level of harmonic pattern. Out of the ashes of popular song comes a new structure, a new aesthetic order, shaped by the intelligence and virtuosity of the improviser; and it is to that structure,

and that structure alone, that our attention should be drawn.²

This aesthetic order, grounded in virtuoso spectacle, has been both a blessing and a curse; it is an ideal that has, on the one hand, created expressions of sublime beauty and, on the other, eroded the economic base of the once popular music with exercises in abstraction that some claim are too difficult to decipher.

The world of hip-hop, Glasper's other pedigree, has its own social contract and historical groundings, though some of its more infamous themes of nihilism, misogyny, and political confrontation have tended to eclipse the dynamism of its defining musical traits. Nonetheless, as a system of organized sound, it has (like contemporary gospel music) flaunted an irreverent and irrepressible voracious muse, absorbing sound elements as quickly as they appear in the public sphere. Likewise, hip-hop has demonstrated similar senses of portability together with the reinforcement and transcendence of ethnic identities as they have been bound to specific sound organizations.

Glasper's *Black Radio* project intelligently and artfully indexes these histories. Indeed, all of the sonic and social agreements of hip-hop, jazz, and gospel (Glasper grew up playing in church) congeal in thoughtful, groove-based arrangements on the album (and in the live shows, though in different ways). When we consider the crafty details of the songs, their conceptual and technological framing, their harmonic environment and relationship to popular song, their virtuosic performances, and their accessibility and even spirituality, we can better understand *Black Radio* as an example of "post-genre" black music. The project plays with sonic, social, and iconic symbols in a way that recalibrates calcified, boring ideas about genre, and turns them on their head with a good sense of funky adventure.

As the music scholar and cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal has written in his insightful review of *Black Radio*, the use of the terms *post-genre* and *black music* might seem oxymoronic.³ What Neal is indicating, of course, is that the concept "genre" operates as an index of sound *and* the social ideas assigned to it. In other words, people socially agree on what sounds mean, to what community they "belong," and what extra-musical connotations they might convey. So if it is post-genre, where does blackness fit in?

Neal's meditation on the project situates Glasper's *Black Radio* in the historical context of black American radio stations, which reinforced the personal connection between Glasper's album and my experiences growing up listening to the Chicago-based station WVON (Voice of the Negro). Chess Records executives Leonard and Phil Chess owned the AM station from 1963 until Leonard's death in 1969. They programmed it all: gospel, blues, jazz, R&B, pop, and because it was Chicago, some more blues. Musical eclecticism defined the station's community of listeners, linking the generations with an "open-eared," aesthetically patient temperament: one of *your* songs was surely coming up next. Tellingly, when I visited Glasper's hometown of Houston a few years back, I noticed the same ecumenical historical consciousness on its radio stations.

But we have largely lost our expansive tastes to the corporate pressures put on program directors to maintain the strict social contracts of genre. And this is the very reason that audiences (and, ironically, the industry) have enjoyed *Black Radio*'s nod back to that more eclectic time, and why I use the forward-looking term post-genre to capture the project's pulse, contour, and impact.

Every track on *Black Radio* rewards – a high standard not often met these days,

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particularly with projects of this size. The most attractive sonic features, as I have stated above, derive from how the digital aspects of the recording share the foreground with Glasper's signature harmonic approach. Another feature that departs from the jazz social contract, as laid out by DeVeaux, is how the project is consciously not dominated by heroic virtuoso solos. These fresh elements, of course, also contributed to *Black Radio's* Grammy nominations in the R&B category, rather than in Glasper's "brand" category, jazz.

Glasper's individualized progressive post-bop vocabulary is instantly recognizable. The project collapses this approach, however, with another aesthetic: gospel music. One cannot help but associate the way that his talented band—Derrick Hodge (bass), Casey Benjamin (vocoder, flutes, saxophone), and Chris Dave (drums)—hit strong pocket grooves with all the deep soul of a sanctified Pentecostal band. They languish over the rhythmic and harmonic possibilities of these grooves, subtly twisting, turning, and burning as if these manipulations were the point of the whole endeavor. With all the dramatic innovations that have recently occurred in gospel music, one quality has held strong: the love of repetitive grooves that work the spirit, providing a platform for some of the most moving singing and instrumental improvisations in the industry. *Black Radio* brims with this groove-centered aesthetic.

Take Glasper's rendition of "Cherish the Day," a cover of the chanting groove-tress herself, Sade. The original, released in 1993, is emblematic of a core aesthetic of urban pop styles of the last twenty years: verse/chorus song forms built on identical chord structures. This quality has become ubiquitous in R&B/urban soul songwriting because of the spillover effect of hip-hop's cyclic loops. What separates Glasper's interpretation of this

overused technique, however, is that his ensemble has taken the concept—an analog interpretation of a digital concept—and injected the improvisational freedom of the jazz/fusion/funk sonic complex. Consider Casey Benjamin's unpredictable and expressive synth solo on "Cherish the Day"—doubled in parallel intervals throughout. It is a husky statement reminiscent of Chick Corea's *Elektric Band* of the 1980s. How the band keeps the groove pitched just hotter than a simmer beneath his improvisation is a marvel of group interplay. It sounds like a very hip church fanning up some community spirit. Why rush through it for radio's sake? Moving the spirit takes time.

With regard to female singers, there is plenty here to appreciate. There is the newcomer, Ledisi, the firebrand vocalist with grit, riffs, and range; Meshell Ndegeocello's warm molasses presentation; Christette Michele's breathy and sensuous croon; Erykah Badu, the priestess of the neo-soul movement of the 1990s; and Layla Hathaway, daughter of the iconic singer Donny Hathaway, who possesses her father's same appealing melismatic execution. Hathaway's reworking of "Cherish the Day" exhibits the best qualities of her vocal presentation: an open-throated, well-supported, and sultry alto voice, captured effectively by the studio engineer. Breathily vowels abound as she moves through tasty melodic lines, working over chord changes like her father, but with much more economy. Lesser-known female singers, sisters Amber and Paris Strother and Anita Bias, offer further neo-soul-ish warmth to the project.

The stylistic inclusivity is not limited to the performers; note how Chris Dave's drum sound is engineered in places to throw back to early-1990s hip-hop samples. Meanwhile, the lavish background vocals on the old school slow jam "Oh, Yeah," featuring Musiq Soulchild and

Ms. Michele, harken back to R&B duet sensations Donny Hathaway and Roberta Flack, but with the complexities of a Jaguar Wright multitrack vocal symphony. And Glasper's acoustic solo after minute four of the track – a tasty ride over a Fender Rhodes drenched soundscape – suggests how this recording might have sounded if long instrumental solos had been the emotional focal point of this project.

Scattered and unusual mixes, electronic effects, stylistic juxtapositions, fade-ins, oral declamations, and rhythmic chants combine to frustrate efforts to “place” this music. The most experimental tracks, showcasing the male voices of Lupe Fiasco, Bilal, Shafiq Husayn, Stokely, and Mos Def, crisscross generic markers with diz-

zying aplomb. Packaged with a statement by writer Angelika Beener – less liner note than manifesto – the album announces itself as something new, a turn toward breaking out of the sonic/marketing formulas so prevalent in today's industry offerings. The most important aspect of this “announcement,” however, is this: *Black Radio* allows the music to do the real preaching. Thus, we hear the band's “post-genre” gesture as a suggestion, not a mandate. In other words, only the music in the *totality* of our experience, music that is boundaryless, market-resistant, artistically adventurous, and conceptually focused can take black music back. Free black music!

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Nate Chinen, “The Corner of Jazz and Hip-Hop,” *The New York Times*, February 24, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/26/arts/music/robert-glasper-experiment-to-release-black-radio.html?pagewanted=all>.
- ² Scott DeVeaux, “‘Nice Work If You Can Get It’: Thelonious Monk and Popular Song,” *Black Music Research Journal* 19 (2) (Autumn 1999): 172.
- ³ Mark Anthony Neal, “Liberating *Black Radio*: The Robert Glasper Experiment,” *The Huffington Post*, March 9, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mark-anthony-neal/black-radio-album-review_b_1326449.html.

The Sound of Racial Feeling

Ronald Radano

Abstract: Critics continue to debate the value of U.S. black music according to a flawed distinction between racial authenticity and social construction. Both sides have it half-right. Black music's value arose historically as the result of a fundamental contradiction in the logic of race tracing back to the slave era. As "Negro" in form, the music was constituted as the collective property of another property, a property-in-slaves. The incongruity produced a perception of black music as an auditory form embodied with fleshly substance, and this sense of racial feeling would live on despite its inconsistencies with modern ideas about race.

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The feel of the body, the sensation of flesh, is never very far from the sound of black music. This quality of embodiment – of animated sound waves working affectively to link person to person – sits at the very heart of its aesthetic value. Listeners often describe U.S. black music as if there were a common sentience, or even a human presence, in its audible makeup. This condition is most obvious in vocal renditions, but particularly revealing are those circumstances in which there is no singer singing, or in which voice represents but one aspect of a larger expression. For example, listeners frequently comment that a particular instrumentalist's tone sounds warm, angry, intimate, or sensuous, to the point of granting that player's timbre and embouchure qualities of emotion. Jazz lovers, moreover, have long compared improvisations to acts of storytelling, recognizing greatness in musical tales that seem to fuse sound with the personality of the artists who play them.

Yet another line of thinking identifies the physicality of black music in its historical associations with dance, a linkage that traces back to early modern styles such as the cakewalk and ragtime. It would be hard to fathom James Brown's recording of *Cold Sweat* without also calling to mind the

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image of his bodily struts and gyrations; to remember Michael Jackson's performances without imagining the grace, precision, and flow of his onstage virtuosity; or to appreciate Nas's hip-hop videos without their accompanying assembly of sultry bodies, clad in high-end ghetto chic. And yet there is still something else going on when we encounter black music's racial feeling, bringing about a condition that reaches to the core of the music's value as it has come to inform the overall character of modern U.S. pop. This feeling involves the historical depth of black music's literal, bodily attachments, producing a palpable affect of human form so enduring that it is difficult to listen without also experiencing the fleshly sensation of blackness as such. It is this perception, built upon historical peculiarities in U.S. racial structures, that still orients black music's value and that continues to inform its experience well after the significance of race in other fields of public knowledge has largely been discredited.

Some might claim that a sense of the body is common to all musical experience, or at least to all music that has come to be experienced in the modern West. Oliver Sacks, for one, has argued that music's affective capacities are inherent to perception, its relation to the living so intimate as to suggest an auditory sentience, inducing a condition of "musicophilia . . . [where] music itself feels almost like a living thing."¹ To be sure, philosophers from Herder to Schopenhauer, and music theorists from Heinrich Schenker to Donald Tovey, have engaged a vast metaphorical language in order to evoke a sense of music as embodied form, whether depicted abstractly in the spirit of *Das Volk* or in the organicism of European harmony. But the masterworks of the European canon have not occupied the lion's share of public attention in the United States for

the past century or so; rather, another realm of musical mastery, produced under the guise of the popular and for which black music has served as the informing impulse, has dominated.

The extraordinary innovations of African American musical artists are where audiences in the United States and in metropolises around the world have commonly sought their cultural truth in sound, perceiving in these diverse performances a wisdom and realness coalescing as racial blackness. It is not simply the case that black music represents the United States' contribution to a greater embodied musicality, expressing a condition inherent in all musical creations. Rather, black music's qualities of animation are deeply seated in a racial logic that is unique to African American practices and that grows from a prior ideological order of knowledge. The embodied experience of black music brings about a collision of ideological systems of thought, a conflict producing an aesthetic order so powerful that it seems even to short-circuit semiotic processes. In a modern world of artifice and hyper-mediation, listeners discover in black music a naturalness and aliveness that conjures the uncanny feeling of a discernible, fleshly presence.

During the thirty-year period after World War II, U.S. black music acquired a stature unprecedented in the history of the nation, an elevation of cultural rank and visibility that established it for the first time as a legitimate American cultural form. What brought about this progressive ascendancy relates to a complex of factors, ranging from changes in attitudes about artistic practice among some of the nation's leading African American musicians to the international circulation of black jazz and pop performers under the auspices of the U.S. government; from the rising power and presence of musical

entertainment in U.S. consumer society to the growing interest in African American culture after the appearance of a new strain of civil-rights activism and the decolonization of African states.² Yet it is difficult to imagine the shift in legitimacy taking place had it not been for still another factor: namely, the curious paradox informing the comprehension of black music as a national cultural expression. As black music assumed a central place in the mainstream of modern life, commentators representing a range of perspectives seemed to agree that what defined the music above all was its connection to an earlier era, when the music's racially distinctive features were thought to be plain and clear. Despite the music's enormous diversity, its wide visibility in contemporary pop, and its unprecedented interaction with the broad spectrum of popular style, many observers preferred to focus on what was different about black music, to the point of proposing that this difference could be traced to a racial aspect masked in the language of "culture," to a realness or soulfulness reaching to the very heart of black being.

Claims of black music's soulful essence were closely bound up with more practical, on-the-ground concerns about cultural ownership, which were being raised at the time by leading artists and activists. For many of these committed advocates, black music represented a form of aesthetic property with a deep history that rightfully deserved to remain exclusively under the control of black people.³ "The idea of the Negro's having 'roots' and that they are a valuable possession rather than the source of ineradicable shame," Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) wrote at the time in his foundational history of black music, "is perhaps the profoundest change within the Negro consciousness since the early part of the [twentieth] century."⁴ Constituted within the social world of

the United States, the difference of musical blackness had been formally recognized as a property form. But it was a property form that seemed to matter much more than a parcel of land or a bag of goods. This particular property was seated at the heart and soul of the African American collectivity, to the point where many believed that one could actually hear in black music the very presence of black humanity. Given how intimately connected it was to the black body, "if anyone should sell it," argued the black activist Booker Griffin, "it should be black people."⁵

It is striking that a new coalescence of ideas about black music's qualities of animation had entered into public knowledge at precisely the same time that enduring beliefs in race were finally coming undone. Just as the biological and social sciences were making plain that physical and phenotypical differences between humans bore no relevance to intelligence, personality, or character, and at the very moment when appeals for political justice were insisting on the equality of all U.S. citizens regardless of color or countenance, the rhetoric surrounding black music had intensified and nearly codified racist notions of musical essence, suggesting, in effect, that audible differences based on race were real.⁶ One might imagine that the entertainment industry's heightened economization of black music would have served to dismantle, rather than to elevate, claims of essence and authenticity, more typical of our understanding of fetishized commodity-forms, whose production and labor are obscured. And yet the music's status as an economized, cultural property appeared actually to have increased its liveliness, its anthropomorphized aura, making it seem to possess, in common parlance, a quality of soul. What in fact made black music different from other musical forms was not some metaphysical condition of

blackness, but rather its material origins as a commodity, first taking shape as part of a racial economy under antebellum slavery. The fleshliness of blackness, the soulful sense of it as a living thing, had entered into post-World War II U.S. culture from a prior time and place. Racial-ideological and economic forces were fundamental to black music's origins and mystification, bringing about what we might think of as an act of appropriation that was never entirely completed. It is in this incompleteness – in African Americans' partial retention of an inalienable, racialized cultural property – that we locate the basis of black music's affective character.

What I am calling the racial feeling of black music originates in an early struggle over cultural ownership that took place when black music was first constituted as a public form. In "Negro music," U.S. slaves produced what may be African America's first and most enduring collective property, an expression recognized and acknowledged as attached to the black body as it existed within the larger social arena of the South. While group performances had always been a part of black social life, reaching back far in African history, they underwent a profound transformation in the context of antebellum Southern culture. If these performances contributed to the making of historical, African ritual practices, they became heightened in significance as they underwent translation within the frames of Western knowledge in the United States, ultimately proving disruptive to the prevailing social order. Significantly, a newly conceived "Negro music" was thought by whites not to be music in the common form, but a direct outgrowth of an inferior species, a property, "Negro slave," which revealed in sound inborn qualities of character and temperament. Racialized, black sound, many observers suggested,

related directly to the physiology of the African body; it therefore could never be entirely extracted from the slaves' possession. Out of this rather bizarre logic, a strange thing happened: a property-form named "slave" was now in possession of its own property; it had created property where no property should have rightly existed. And from this seemingly miraculous development, turning on a glitch in the racial logic of the U.S. slave economy, black chattel established during the late-antebellum era an entire world of its own, a distinctive, musically informed culture whose value depended on the music's structural inaccessibility to a white majority. Seemingly autonomous, "Negro music" was in fact fundamentally connected to the primary, economic context of masters and slaves, to a social relation that determined its racial particularity.

Thinking about the rise of black music this way helps us revise the common assumption that it grew directly out of the internal contexts of an insider culture, and enables us to bring the music's understanding into alignment with current philosophical theories of blackness.⁷ Such a way of thinking also challenges the view that black music is a strictly "black" entity that, despite its various transmutations, has somehow maintained an enduring quality or essence – a "changing same," as Baraka famously called it – unique to African American experience and accessible to whites only after having emerged, full-blown, from the confines of absolute blackness. Thinking about black music this way, finally, helps us recognize how it emerged and evolved according to identifiable social processes along the symbolic boundaries that structured a profoundly racialized world.⁸ Black music's value is not, in reality, inherent to a racialized physicality, nor did it arise in its essential form directly out of the African past, no matter how

important a role that past played in the music's formation. Rather, it developed as the result of an unequal economic relation, as a property of a greater property-in-slaves, whose performative engagements with the "supernatural" established precedents for sonically based forms of exchange. From the start, the music's power was patently material: it simultaneously exceeded white control while also remaining structurally embedded in a white-majority world. Black music's very constitution depended on the relation of domination and resistance within the ideological force fields of racist belief.

It follows, then, that the idea of "Negro music" could not have come into existence had it not been for a nineteenth-century conception of race that allowed for humans to be categorized as a species of property. That status meant that any creative expression produced by slaves should remain under the rightful claim of white mastery; never would the slaves' music simply be "music," for it would always be attached to those black bodies-as-things. The refusal of whites to observe black music as "music" marked the basis of its inaccessibility; despite their status as owners, the slaves' masters could never fully possess black music and culture. After slavery, moreover, this embodied, racial feeling within black music would elevate its cultural value and its authenticity, identifying a kind of secret life existing within the music's resonant forms. While contemporary writers still commonly argue that authenticity is inherent to black music, and that it is in fact what has compelled whites to repeatedly attempt to steal it, we might better understand authenticity as something born out of a botched robbery involving two colluding parties. Here, the thieves (whites) could never wholly possess that which they attempted to steal; the very ground rules they had established and operated

under, rules that had invented difference, precluded their ownership of black music. The incompleteness of white claims would thus expose a fundamental contradiction in the relationship of race and culture, whereby black music's inextricable attachment to the black body limited white entitlement to what was, in the emerging modern, deemed to be a publicly accessible commodity-form.

Beyond the slave era and into the first two decades of the twentieth century, the bodily attachments of black music remained deeply connected to new African American forms, carrying forward an increasingly anachronistic idea of race into the modern. What was perceived to be only partially accessible to whites steadily grew in aesthetic value, particularly as black musical forms began to circulate as commodities and as the racial idea of an impermeable cultural blackness assumed a central place in popular thinking. Listeners came to believe that black music's embodiment revealed a peculiar African American sensibility that was somehow shielded from the wider white realm, when, in fact, the music's embodiment had simply expanded via the machinery of the consumer market. Mass circulation brought black music seemingly everywhere as it rapidly developed within the emerging lingua franca of popular music, appearing in the new genres of musical theater, ragtime, blues, and "syncopated music." These styles, in turn, inspired new expressions by white vaudeville and blackface entertainers, whose conscious imitations and musical derisions reinforced the idea of blackness as real. This is why interracial musical relation and exchange would never tarnish black music's realness, why the white, attempted robbery of black music was always inevitably botched; it had to be in order to maintain the very idea of race. Had it not been for this historical

legacy and the racial logic it produced, the value attached to black musical authenticity would have never endured. Indeed, had it not been for race, black musical authenticity would never have existed in the first place.⁹

It was around this same time that celebrated black musical forms came to play a critical role in shaping a distinctive African American history, uncompromised by white knowledge and claim. James Monroe Trotter's portrayal of black stage performers in *Music and Some Highly Musical People* (1878) and W.E.B. Du Bois's tribute to the "sorrow songs" in the *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) are two famous examples. Better known at the time among African American city dwellers, however, were the efforts of a new generation of black popular composers who proposed that their syncopated music provided evidence of black cultural and racial uniqueness. Among the most familiar today is pianist Scott Joplin, who embraced the belief in a racially identifiable musical essence echoing forth from a distant past. "There has been ragtime music in America ever since the Negro race has been here," Joplin told the African American critic Lester Walton in 1913. It was just that "white people took no notice of it until about twenty years ago." The celebrated bandleader James Reese Europe similarly asserted that the essence of black popular music was very old, reaching back to a primal order. In an exchange from 1909, he told Walton that white people were basically clueless about this origin, having become confused by their own stylistic labels. The term "ragtime," Europe explained, "is merely a nick-name, or rather a fun name given to Negro rhythm by our Caucasian brother musicians many years ago."¹⁰ For both Joplin and Europe, the animated properties of black music could never be extracted; indeed, they could only

be vaguely comprehended by whites. But in that vagueness, one discerned the presence of a black body enlivening audible black forms. As Walton himself asserted, despite its long history within a majority-white world, Negro music was "of purely Negro origin."

In all of these instances, black music was understood as a primordial entity, a racially determined sound form whose economized origins in slavery were reenvisioned according to a new origin in the African past, only to be reeconomized and reracialized in the modern as the cultural property of a new African American citizenry. Black music was the stuff of blackness itself; it was at once seemingly alive in the body and also attached to a long-gone ancestry, a realm predating Western modern knowledge and history. Endowed with ancestral roots, it had ascended from the past into the present and among the living, taking form as a modern-age relic. In fact, the term *relic* was sometimes employed to describe "Negro music," as well as blacks themselves, particularly those elders who had survived since slavery. *Relic* was also used to refer to the burnt detritus of lynching victims, suggesting a perceived relation between dead, black bodies and the ancient, African sounds that carried forth among an inferior, declining species. Indeed, the racist rhetoric of blacks and whites never seemed too far apart, despite the unequal consequence it had on their lives. "Hav[ing] forgotten the language of their savage ancestors," the white critic Henry Edward Krehbiel proposed in his 1914 book, *Afro-American Folk-Songs*, "does it follow that . . . they have also forgotten all of their music? May relics of the music not remain in a subconscious memory?"¹¹ This was another way of articulating the common view that African American musical practices were racially determined. They were intimately connected to the black

flesh, living on as a resonance of ancestral voices: “spooks,” as in the common parlance of the time, or what James Weldon Johnson later called “the specter of minstrelsy.”¹² In the imagination of both blacks and whites, black music was almost as much a part of black personhood as were one’s flesh, hair, and vital organs. It brought into relation a racial physicality with the larger project of black culture, a culture that grew conceptually more expansive, recognizable, and affecting as it circulated in public knowledge. And because black music was not limited to the physicality of the body, but took form within the sensory arena of hearing, it had far greater social influence and effect. What was a valuable possession also represented an occupying force within the greater body politic.

Given the power of this kind of pervasive racial thinking, it is no real surprise that so many African Americans would vigorously invest in the evolving, racial myth of black music. Innovation of musical difference became key to the advance of black culture, enabled by the growth of a new professional class of musicians whose talents accommodated a consumer public caught up in racial fantasy. Each investment, each recommitment to the claims of difference – in soulfulness, in hotness, in sorrow, in syncopation, in improvisation – paid back mightily. With each innovation, each new gesture of “Negro music,” the racial feeling of blackness would multiply and grow stronger, as it also reaffirmed African Americans’ creative ability to invent form, contradicting enduring claims of an “imitative” nature. Black music had become a prized possession with which African Americans would bargain for a place in U.S. cultural life; by affirming their difference from a majority-white public, and revealing again and again the botched attempted robbery of musical culture within an

established master/slave relation. In “the secret of black song and laughter,” as Zora Neale Hurston called it, African Americans had found a common currency, a cultural right that “they traded . . . to the other Americans for things they could use.”¹³

Into the 1920s and 1930s, and with the emergence of jazz, black music supplied African Americans with a new kind of value, a new mode of cultural currency through which they traded and bargained their way into public life. The music’s prominence as the international language of an emerging, world-metropolitan youth culture helped broaden its stature and appeal among African Americans inside the United States, whose interest was fueled by reports of the successes of white society orchestras performing under the name of jazz and touring Europe, Asia, and Latin America.¹⁴ Motivated by this turn of events, a new generation of highly talented and educated black musicians began introducing a radically innovative style that fused Southern practices with the musical grammar and performance practices of an emerging mainstream sound. Hurston characterized the hot jazz of late-1920s Harlem as a new life form that “rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury,” bringing into being a modern incarnation of racial feeling, and revealing the body lurking within an otherwise civilized art form. In the same fashion that black composers had before them, these new black artists sought to repel white claims of possession: “I am not playing jazz,” Duke Ellington insisted in refusing the journalistic label, “I am trying to play the natural feelings of a people.”¹⁵ It might seem only proper that the mystifications of racial blackness would be sustained even as older ideas of race had begun to collapse. After all, American investment in black music’s mystification had been under way

for nearly a hundred years, and it profoundly affected tastes and experiences across the color line. For many musicians who subsequently emerged on the scene, the claims of realness and authenticity may have been what Stuart Hall would call “strategic,” particularly as the music’s economic value grew.¹⁶ And yet it is nonetheless striking that an earlier mystification of black music became embedded within a commodity-form, its putative racial essence strangely formalized in order to advocate for its equal standing among the other arts. No matter how right and just such claims may have been, they also were confusing. It is a confusion that lives on into the present.

Still today, we have a situation whereby the most important indicator of aesthetic value in popular music is also the principal marker of separation among its citizenry. We live in a world in which, despite all the productive challenges to the claims of race – all the biological and historical evidence amassed to demonstrate that race is not real, together with the sea change in political and social thought about racial inequality – the qualities of black music still seem profoundly racial, or at the very least, the racial aspect of the music remains unresolved. That we find

value in this embodied racial affect is why black music remains so influential. It is also why we can hear in music that is not identifiably “racial” (that is, majority-white music) key signifiers of blackness, from the gospel inflections common to popular vocal styles to the groove-based rhythmic orientation that underpins over sixty years of rock ‘n’ roll. The accumulation of meanings attached to this affective blackness has assumed the quality of myth: in black music’s many forms, we encounter allegories of race as it lives on in the United States. It is, indeed, not entirely an unhappy tale, for it is from these racial qualities of animation that we derive so much pleasure and witness the continuing struggle of difference. But it remains unclear what ultimately the music’s narratives can tell us. As appealing as it is, black music’s racial embodiment also supports a reactionary politics that goes against the grain of our strongest democratic ideals, suggesting the need, after David Scott, for a new conscript of black music in the vein of the tragic.¹⁷ It may be our challenge to consider how we might begin to deracinate music’s critical lexicon and modes of analysis while also paying respect to the legacies and traditions created under the banner of racial difference.

ENDNOTES

Author’s Note: A version of this essay was delivered before the Department of Music, University of California, Berkeley, on October 5, 2012. I am grateful for the vigorous exchange that ensued, and particularly for the comments and follow-ups by Ben Brinner, Steve Feld, Jocelyne Guilbault, Andrew Jones, Leigh Raiford, Griff Rollefson, and Bryan Wagner.

¹ Oliver Sacks, *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage, 2008), x.

² Entry into a vast literature might begin with Scott Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain’t: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community and Black Chicago, 1940 – 1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); and Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

³ Such thinking seemed to lay behind Roy Eldridge’s claim in 1951 that he could hear the difference between white and black jazz improvisers. His failure to meet the challenge in an

- infamous “Blindfold Test” interview with Leonard Feather, published in *Down Beat*, served to reinforce white attitudes of entitlement. Feather clearly missed the point of the exercise, showing no comprehension of why Eldridge would make the claim as a defense of black cultural ownership. The incident serves as a case in point of how racially essentialist stances could be put to strategic use in order to claim cultural property. Leonard Feather, *The Book of Jazz* (1957; New York: Horizon, 1965), 47.
- 4 LeRoi Jones, *Blues People* (New York: William Morrow, 1963), 218.
 - 5 Griffin made this statement in a 1971 article published in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*. For background, see Charles L. Hughes, “‘Country-Soul’: Race and the Recording Industry in the United States South, 1960 – 1980,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison (2012), 163.
 - 6 Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (1963; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); George W. Stocking, Jr., *Race, Culture and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (1968; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); P. V. Tobias, “Brain-size, Grey Matter, and Race – Fact or Fiction?” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 32 (1970): 3 – 26, cited in Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, rev. ed. (1981; New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 140 – 141; and Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed. (1994; New York: Routledge, 1986).
 - 7 See, for example, Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005); and Robert Gooding-Williams, *Look, a Negro! Philosophical Essays on Race, Culture and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
 - 8 Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár, “The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (2002): 167 – 195.
 - 9 And while practices that may be attributed to soul can be reproduced and even expanded upon by whites, the soulfulness of white expressions always remains suspect simply because white subjectivity was not constituted within this racial economy; its connection to soulfulness is always mediated through the idea of blackness. In this way, all white productions of black music carry a dubious authenticity that qualifies even the strongest performances.
 - 10 Joplin is quoted in Edward Berlin, *King of Ragtime: Scott Joplin and His Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 222. For Europe, see Lester Walton, “Is Ragtime Dead?” *New York Age*, April 8, 1909. Thanks to Dave Gilbert for calling my attention to this article.
 - 11 Henry Edward Krehbiel, *Afro-American Folk-Songs* (1914; New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1962), ix.
 - 12 James Weldon Johnson, Preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, found in *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 281 – 283.
 - 13 Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* (Berkeley, Calif.: Turtle Island, 1983), 78.
 - 14 Studies of the international emergence of jazz are rapidly developing and already represent a vast literature. One place to begin is Bruce Johnson, “The Jazz Diaspora,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz*, ed. Mervyn Cooke and David Horn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 96 – 113. Reports of the international presence of jazz were beginning to appear domestically in the early 1920s. Recordings such as Fletcher Henderson’s *Shanghai Shuffle* and Louis Armstrong’s *Cornet Chop Suey* show that interest traveled both ways.
 - 15 Zora Neale Hurston, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1995), 828 – 829. Ellington is quoted in Eric Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 37.
 - 16 Stuart Hall, “What is this ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” *Social Justice* 20 (1 – 2) (Spring/Summer 1993).
 - 17 David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004).

Satchmo's Shadow: An Excerpt from *Satchmo at the Waldorf*

Terry Teachout

TERRY TEACHOUT, drama critic for *The Wall Street Journal*, is the author of *Satchmo at the Waldorf* (2011), which premiered in Orlando, Fla., and was produced in 2012 at Shakespeare & Company of Lenox, Mass., Long Wharf Theatre of New Haven, Conn., and Philadelphia's Wilma Theater. He received a Guggenheim Fellowship to support the completion of his latest book, *Duke: A Life of Duke Ellington* (2013). His other books include *All in the Dances: A Brief Life of George Balanchine* (2004), *Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong* (2009), and *The Skeptic: A Life of H. L. Mencken* (2002). He has also written the libretti for three operas by Paul Moravec: *The Letter* (2009), *Danse Russe* (2011), and *The King's Man* (2013).

Author's Note: Writing the biography of a performing artist is like standing in the wings to watch a play. You see what the public sees, only from a different perspective. *Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong*, my 2009 biography of the greatest jazz musician of the twentieth century, is about the much-loved genius-entertainer who made millions of people feel warm inside – but it's also about the private Armstrong, who swore like a trooper and knew how to hold a grudge. The fact that Satchmo (as he liked to call himself) had two sides to his personality doesn't mean that the public man was somehow less "real" than the private one. Like all geniuses, Armstrong was complicated, and that complexity was part of what made his music so beautiful and profound.

Biography is about telling, theater about showing. Having written a book that told the story of Armstrong's life, it occurred to me that it might be a worthwhile challenge to try to show an audience what he was like offstage. This was the seed from which *Satchmo at the Waldorf* grew. What turned it into a full-fledged play was the idea of having the same actor double as Armstrong and Joe Glaser, Armstrong's mob-connected white manager. (At a later stage in the writing of *Satchmo at the Waldorf*, I decided to have the actor play a third "character," Miles Davis, who appears in two short scenes.) You can't have a play without conflict, and the trick to making a one-man play dramatic is finding a way to make that conflict palpable, even visible. When I wrote Glaser into *Satchmo at the Waldorf*, it was as

An Excerpt
from
“Satchmo
at the
Waldorf”

though Armstrong’s shadow had suddenly appeared on stage, dark and threatening. All at once I had my villain, the Iago to Satchmo’s Othello – though, like all the best villains, Glaser isn’t nearly as simple, or evil, as he looks.

Satchmo at the Waldorf takes place in March 1971 in a dressing room backstage at the Empire Room of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York, where Armstrong performed in public for the last time, four months before his death. Much of what he and Glaser say in the play derives from things that they said in real life, and the way in which both men talk onstage is an accurate portrayal of their habits of speech, right down to the last four-letter word. But the play is still a work of fiction, albeit one that is freely based on fact. It’s an attempt to suggest the nature of their personal relationship, which was so fraught with tension that no mere biographer, obliged as he is to stick to the factual record, could hope to do more than hint at its endless subtleties. Fictionalizing that relationship has freed me to speculate about things that I cannot know for sure but have good reason to suspect. Gordon Edelstein, the director of *Satchmo at the Waldorf*, told me that he believed the play to be about “love – and betrayal.” As soon as he said that, I knew that he understood what I was trying to do.

This is my first play, and unlikely as it may sound, I never gave any serious thought to trying my hand at playwriting until I sat down to write the first draft of *Satchmo at the Waldorf* early in 2010. I am, after all, a drama critic by trade, and though a fair number of critics have written plays, it doesn’t happen very often. We inhabit the world of theory, and rarely if ever do we have occasion to dirty our hands with the theater’s ruthless practicalities. Now that I’ve done so, I think that I’ve learned to appreciate them more fully than ever before. Kenneth

Tynan, the British drama critic, was kidding on the square when he said that a critic is “a man who knows the way but can’t drive the car.” The first draft of *Satchmo at the Waldorf* was a carefully drawn road map. The final version is – I hope – a journey.

GLASER You know the *schvartzes*, they’re all lazy or nuts, and at first I thought maybe Louie was just another one of them lazy *schvartzes*. Cause right off he says he wants to leave all the business to me. The idea is, I pick the guys in the band, get the jobs, book the travel. I pay all his bills off the top of the take, then we split what’s left right down the middle, fifty-fifty. In other words, *Joe Glaser* does all the work! I might as well have been doing his fucking laundry! Know what he told me? “I don’t care about being rich, Mr. Glaser. You be rich. I just wanna play my horn.” (*Incredulously*) Jee-zus Christ. What kinda guy don’t wanna be rich?

But I gotta say, I was wrong about Louie. He wasn’t lazy – he was smart. You think about it. He’s out on the road every day with the musicians, those fucking prima donnas. You think he wants to piss ’em off? Hell, no! So I hire the guys, I decide what to pay ’em, and that means when somebody wants more money, Louie can say, “Hey, Pops, ain’t got nothing to do with the dough, you go talk to the boss.” Smart. And once we really got going, I worked him like a dog. Kept him on the road three hundred nights a year. And did he complain? Not once.

Course it was always first class with the All Stars. Top clubs, top cash. Work ’em like dogs, treat ’em like kings, that’s the way to run a band. And Louie trusted me, right down the line. Cause he knew what

he was good at, and I knew what I was good at – and *he* knew what I was good at.

The lights change.

ARMSTRONG You a colored man, you always gonna wonder 'bout white folk. May think they like you, think you in tight with 'em, but then you look up and all of a sudden, they someplace you can't go.

Now *some* white folks, you know they cool soon as you meet 'em. But the majority of white people? Two-thirds of 'em don't like niggers, but they all got one they just crazy about. (*Rolling his eyes and grinning maliciously*) Every white man in the world got one nigger they just love his dirty drawers. Fuck all the rest of us. You think I don't know that? Shit. What you think my life been like? I done played in ninety-nine million hotels I couldn't sleep at – and that was up north! Down south wasn't *no* hotels for colored. Find a boarding house or sleep on the bus, piss in the bushes. No place to eat, neither. Use to stock up in the grocery stores, come out with a loaf of bread, can of sardines, big hunks of baloney and cheese, then we'd eat it in the bus.

Sometimes we go round to the back door of them white restaurants got colored cooks. Knock on the door and say, "Howdy, fellas, what you got for old Satchmo tonight?" And they'd say, "Well, hello, there, Satch! Come on in, take a load off." They always give you what you want long as the boss ain't looking. Ate me a lotta fine T-bones off of them big wooden chopping blocks, standing right there in the kitchen. (*Ironically*) Satchmo the Great, standing in the kitchen.

(*Shrugging it off*) Course you know it ain't always like that. White people, they ain't naturally meaner than colored – they just been on top too long. And *good* white folk did everything decent for me. Play in my

band, buy my records, come to my shows. Kept coming when the colored started listening to rhythm and blues and that bebop shit, didn't care about old Satch no more. No, white folks never did stop coming to see me. (*Gesturing to the audience with visible amusement*) And it don't look like they gonna. They looove my music.

Here, now, looka this.

He reaches into his shirt and pulls out a Star of David hanging on a pendant around his neck.

Star of David. Jewish star. Mr. Glaser, he done give it to me. (*As if revealing a secret*) He Jewish, you know. I wear it every day cause the Jews, they been so good to me. Maybe that's why I trusted Mr. Glaser – he was a Jew, and the Jews never let me down.

Down in New Orleans there was this Jewish family, the Karnofskys. They was junk peddlers done come over from Russia. I worked for them when I was seven years old. Did odd jobs. And they didn't treat me like no butler or nothing. Pat me on my head, tell me I'm a good boy, treat me warm and kind. Like family. Use to sit at they table like I was one of they own. Eat that good Jewish food, teach me them pretty Jewish songs. We'd bring the junk wagon in and they'd say, "Little Louis, you worked hard today, gonna be too late for you to get your supper when you get home, so you just sit right down here and eat with us."

A pause.

They even loaned me the money to buy my first horn. Beat-up little cornet down at the pawn shop. Thought it was the prettiest thing I ever saw.

The lights change.

GLASER You know my father was a doctor? He wanted me to be a doctor, too. "My son, the doctor." Did the *bar mitzvah*, got the fountain pen. Even took violin

Terry
Teachout

An Excerpt
from
"Satchmo
at the
Waldorf"

lessons! Only I couldn't hack the straight life. Too slow. So I said fuck it. I started selling used cars, managed a couple of boxers, met a guy who knew a guy, and next thing you know, I'm running the Sunset Club for Al Capone. A nice Jewish boy, working for the wops. But I always liked Al. When he said it, you could take it to the bank. And I liked the whole setup. I mean, shit, who wants to be a doctor? What I like is to push a button and things happen – right now. I like making deals. And I love to see the other guy blink. That's why I come on so hard. You know. (*Barks*) "Fuck you, you little cocksucker!" (*As before, casually*) That kind of thing. Cause people don't expect to hear you talking like that in an office on Park Avenue. Makes 'em sit up and take notice.

You know the way we do business? With a pistol stuck up the other guy's nose. The Chicago way. But the best way is when the other guy *thinks* you gotta pistol, and that you really *would* stick it up his nose if he gave you any shit. And once you work for Al Capone, for the rest of your life that's what people think. "Hey, I fuck with this guy, I could get my legs broken." Even now. Every time I yell at 'em, they piss blood.

A pause.

And then . . . they do what I want.

The lights change.

ARMSTRONG Good white, bad white. Good colored, bad colored. Down in New Orleans, them light-skin colored, them Creoles, they think they hot shit, look down on the rest of us like we was dirt. Jelly Roll Morton, he like that. Had that diamond in his front tooth. Used to swan around saying, "Don't call me colored – I'm one hundred percent French." But you know what? He *still* had to eat out back in the kitchen, just like me.

That why I call myself "Louis," not "Louie." Mr. Glaser, he call me "Louie." White folks all call me "Louie." The announcer here, he call me "Louie" every night before the show. That's O.K., call me what you want, but I ain't no goddamn Frenchman, ain't no Creole, ain't no "Louie." I'm *black*. Black as a spade flush. Woke up black this morning, black when I go to bed, still gonna be black when I get up tomorrow. Don't like it, you can kiss my black ass.

A pause.

But you know what? I don't think folks wanna hear all that angry shit when they lay down that good money to come hear me play. They ain't paying for me to make 'em feel bad. I'm just an old ham actor – blow a tune, tell a joke. I'm there in the cause of happiness. Like when I play the blues, maybe I'm thinking about one of them low-down moments, like when your woman don't treat you right. Hell of a thing when a woman tell you, "I got me another mule in my stall." But when I sing about it, I smile. Make *you* smile.

Mr. Glaser, he done taught me that. Got right in my face and said, "Gotta tone down the jazz, Louie." Told me to smile real big and swing that music lightly and politely.

The lights change.

GLASER I knew how to *present* Louie. Those other dumb-putz managers he had? None of 'em had a clue. When I came along, he was still doing all the crazy jigaboo stuff. Smoke that dope, get out on stage, sing that mush-mouth jungle-bunny mumbo-jumbo, play a thousand high Cs in a row. Fine for the jazz fans, but how many jazz fans are there? You gotta play to the crowd. Let the people know you ain't some goddamn spook with a razor in your pocket.

So Louie comes to me and says, “Help me, Mr. Glaser. Tell me what to do.” (*Speaking directly to the dressing-room chair as though Armstrong were sitting in it*) And I sit him down and I say, “Look, Louie, you wanna work for me, here’s the deal. Forget the critics, forget the musicians. Stop blowing your brains out playing all them goddamn high Cs. Ain’t no money in it. That voice of yours – *that’s* where the money is. Play your cards right, do what I say, one day you won’t even have to play the trumpet. You can just stand up there and sing. You’re an *entertainer*. Just like Al Jolson or Sophie Tucker. So start playing for the public. Sing so people can understand the words. Wave that handkerchief and smile like you don’t gotta care in the world. Do that, you’re gonna make ten times as much money.”

Didn’t give me any backtalk. Not about that, not about nothing. No, he said, “That’s what I’m gonna do, Mr. Glaser,” and he went right out and did it . . . and now look at him. Man’s a goddamn money machine. And you think anybody bought “Hello, Dolly!” to hear him play the fucking trumpet? *Nobody gives a shit!* They don’t care about jazz – it’s *Louie* they love.

Excerpts from *Passport to Paris*

Vernon Duke

Editor's Note: Russian-born, naturalized American Vernon Duke (1903 – 1969) is best remembered for popular songs such as “April in Paris” (a sort of theme song and big instrumental hit for the Count Basie “Second Testament” band), “I Can’t Get Started,” and “Autumn in New York.” But he might not have been happy that his legacy turned out this way, for he was also a prolific composer of “serious” or “classical” music. Half of who Duke was as a musician never made the impact he hoped for; and the half that did reach the public was not always recognizable as a Duke creation.

Those Duke gems of the Great American Songbook and of the repertoire of a generation of American jazz musicians (an irony as Duke never much liked “real” jazz) are often attributed to some other songwriter. Most casual listeners assume that these songs were composed by Harry Warren, Irving Berlin, or Duke’s good friend, George Gershwin. Hipper listeners might mention Zelda Fitzgerald’s favorite composer, Vincent Youmans (of “Tea for Two” fame), or Harold Arlen (“Blues in the Night” and the songs from the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*), or Burton Lane (“Old Devil Moon,” “How are Things in Glocca Mora,” and “On a Clear Day”).

But as his witty and insightful autobiography, *Passport to Paris* (1955), makes clear, Duke was a hard-working, ambitious composer not initially interested in writing popular music. He may never have pursued that course had he not been so enamored of Gershwin, or had there been greater commercial interest in his “serious” music. Yet there was some-

thing about his divided self, or rather his self-awareness of his divided self, that also tended to work against his presence as a composer in either popular or art music. Duke perceived such a stark division between his popular tunesmith self and his serious composer self that he constructed two distinct professional personas. He opens *Passport to Paris* by explaining to readers how crucial this division was to his public reception and to his self-understanding as an artist:

According to Who's Who, I have spent my "entire career" (come, come, I'm still spending it) writing two kinds of music: the serious or unrewarding kind as Vladimir Dukelsky and the unserious but lucrative variety as Vernon Duke. Almost every interview I've ever had has brought some tired references to "the Jekyll and Hyde of Music," "the Two-Headed Janus of Music," etc. There have been quite a few cases of composers who successfully managed to write in both the high- and low-brow genre, but I am entirely unique in one respect. Gershwin always remained Gershwin whether he wrote *Porgy* or "I Got Rhythm"; Weill was easily recognizable as Weill whether he tackled *Mahagonny* or *One Touch of Venus*; and even Lennie Bernstein is his ingratiating self whether he tears into *Jeremiah* or *On the Town*; but Dukelsky in no way resembles Duke.

There isn't a note of jazz in my serious music, and there are no symphonic overtones to my musical-comedy output. I don't think that's anything to be proud of.... My versatility, far from being a boon, has in reality been infuriating to most musical people.

There is an uneasy humor about Duke's inability to bring together his warring creative halves, a lack of integration that he believed may have made him a weaker artist. In any case, *Passport to Paris* is a wonderfully evocative autobiography about a young, aristocratic Russian boy who de-

sires to be a serious composer; the wildly engaging, sometimes bizarre, highly egotistical and sycophantic cast of Russian and French musicians, dancers, and artists with whom he travels; his narrow escape from the fires of the Russian Revolution; his efforts to get his noncommercial compositions performed; his struggles performing in various bands at coffee shops and ersatz ethnic nightclubs (ethnicity was for sale long before diversity came along); and the encouragement he receives from Gershwin, who dubbed him "Duke," to write popular songs.

I hope that *Passport to Paris* will be reprinted one day. In the meantime, I have chosen two short excerpts from the book to reprint here. The first involves Duke's effort to keep himself and his family fed by taking a job in a "salon trio" in Constantinople, one of several stops after fleeing Russia. Paid three liras a night, he eventually ditches this job for employment playing piano accompaniments to silent films, as well as jobs playing pop tunes for British soldiers and seemingly unrehearsed recitals at the British embassy in Turkey. The second excerpt concerns his meeting Gershwin, as well as his internal struggle with being pulled toward writing popular music while also trying to make a career of serious composition. (Duke's career as a popular songwriter took off in the 1930s.)

I am grateful to Duke's widow, Kay Duke Ingalls, for giving us permission to publish these excerpts.

– Gerald Early

Excerpts
from
"Passport
to Paris"

A [sic] English colonel visited the restaurant where I held forth with my violin and cello partners, and engaged me on the spot for a concert in his barracks. The pay was good but I had no notion of what was expected of me. On arriving, I found masses of enlisted men, roaring drunk on Turkish beer, who greeted my entrance with hoarse shouts and demands for songs like "K-K-K-Katy," "Tipperary" and "For Me and My Gal," which I knew by heart; after a successful start, I was urged to play various English folk ballads totally unknown to me. Here I was seated at the rickety piano, bewildered by the singing, shouting Tommies, who demanded encore after encore. God alone knows what I played and how the Tommies were able to follow me, or I them, but at the end of the evening, the tall cockney sergeant shook his head and handed me five liras, adding, "Ere's yer money, chum, even if you ain't much good as a pianoforte player."

I always had the enviable ability to talk about a flop as though it were a hit (it proved most helpful in later years), and told awed friends of having conquered the British. A young Greek decided that I was ripe for the British Embassy and arranged for a recital there with a portly Russian baritone. For this I was to collect ten liras, and of course we joyously accepted; on the day of the concert it was pointed out to me that we were to dress, meaning white tie. I don't think I owned a necktie in 1920, white or colored, and as for tails, they were associated in my mind with the Russian Imperial Court or the films. The possibility of my getting into one of those things never entered my mind. Yet here it was – tails or no ten liras. In despair, I ran to the kind little Greek, who was short and somewhat crippled and produced a morning coat and striped trousers from his own wardrobe. His tails were at the tailor's, but the

morning coat was certainly formal as hell, so no one could say I was not "correct."

I played my accompaniments looking as if my clothes had been shrunk in a rainstorm, and at the end of the concert, after warmly congratulating the baritone, the ambassador dismissed me with a cool nod. I did get the ten liras, for which I would happily have dressed in a barrel.

That first winter out of Russia I began to function (unofficially and unprofitably) as Dukelsky and Duke. I disliked popular songs, owing, no doubt, to such exponents as Nyegin, and I loathed the "arty" sex-serenades of the industrious Vertinsky, who was always popping up unexpectedly. One afternoon after lunch, I saw the original Moscow Pierrot lolling dandiacally in the *Mayak* salon, all the "well-born" waitresses (ex-gentlewomen, naturally) worshipping at his impeccably shod feet. The master was at his most affable and was reciting his latest sexotic, as Walter Winchell would have it, roundelay. He then distributed engraved cards bearing the legend *The Black Rose, Cabaret Artistique*. The Moscow Pierrot had found himself some well-heeled Armenian Harlequins, and they had provided him with his own *boîte*. I was too young and too poor to frequent such dens, but I heard a few months later that the authorities staged a raid in the place and unearthed quantities of cocaine and 100 per cent syphilis among the lady servants and entertainers. No more Black Rose.

But the Rose of Jazz, healthy and blooming, was by now firmly planted on the European shore of the Bosphorus. *Mayak* patrons began to request "Hindustan," "Tell Me" and "Till We Meet Again." I promptly purchased all three, also Irving Berlin's earlier successes and a thing mysteriously entitled "Swanee" by a man improbably styled Geo. Gershwin. The Berlins were good in their way, but the Gershwin sent me into ecstasies. The

bold sweep of the tune, its rhythmic freshness and, especially, its syncopated gait, hit me hard and I became an “early-jazz” fiend. That’s not quite what I mean, because (shudder, ye New Orleans purists!) the “real” New Orleans jazz and the true-blue blues impressed me considerably less. “What can you expect from a long hair” did I hear you say? Perhaps I can explain it best by admitting my admiration for the “musicality” and a composer’s inventiveness in young Gershwin, which was (and is) missing from the “real” thing, largely a collectively produced mood, anonymous and crude.

[...]

Madame Gautier mastered my songs – even provided English translations – and sang them at the next Guild concert. The audience reception was indicative of other such receptions traditionally accorded new, but not *too* new, music – the sort of reception where the hopeful composer asks his best friend, “Well, how did it go?” and gets this answer: “Pretty well, I thought, how did *you* think it went?” The critics said nothing much and nobody “hailed” me – except a swarthy young man named George Gershwin, whom I first knew as *Geo.* Gershwin, the creator of “Swanee,” the copy of which was by now gathering dust on the big piano in the Russian *Mayak* in far-off Constantinople.

Gershwin impressed me as a superbly equipped and highly skilled composer – not just a concocter of commercial jingles. His extraordinary left hand performed miracles in counter-rhythms, shrewd canonic devices, and unexpected harmonic shifts. “Where did you study?” I asked, after listening to him play. George laughed, a cigar stuck between his white teeth. “Oh, I didn’t study much – some piano and harmony with a man called

Charlie Hambitzer, some lessons from Rubin Goldmark – but on the whole I guess I’m just a natural-born composer.”

When I informed him of my years with Reinhold Glière, the difficulty I had had mastering counterpoint and orchestration at fifteen, he was vaguely impressed. “Gee, it must be great to know so much,” he said, eyeing me with curiosity. “But now that you’ve learned it all – what are you doing with it?” By way of reply I played an extremely cerebral piano sonata. Gershwin listened, rather impatiently, I thought, and then shook his head. “There’s no money in that kind of stuff,” he said, “no heart in it, either. Try to write some real popular tunes – and don’t be scared about going lowbrow. They will open you up!”

This rather startling remark of George’s – “they will open you up” – stayed with me through all the years that we were friends. Too many people have climbed on the bandwagon of George’s posthumous glory. Yet, together with two or three others, I was as close to him as a friend can be. This friendship lasted until his last trip to Hollywood, which brought about his tragic and untimely death at the age of thirty-eight.

I doubt that Gershwin, then just beginning to “hit it,” liked the strange little songs I wrote. As he expressed it to me later, he was surprised by the fact that so young a man (I was five years his junior) should write such dry and intellectual stuff. Eva Gautier sang three of George’s songs at her own recital (composer at the piano) and the audience literally shouted the place down with approval. A few months later, Marguerite d’Alvarez, then at the height of her fame, “stopped the show” with more composer-accompanied Gershwin. Odd that some of our present-day recitalists don’t hire Duke Ellington (or the other Duke – Vernon – for that matter) to inject a little much-needed life into their Town Hall appearances.

Vernon
Duke

Excerpts
from
"Passport
to Paris"

I was now branching out in all directions. Greta Torpadie, the Norwegian, sang three more songs of mine. Marie Kiekhoefer, then an executive of the Wolfsohn Musical Bureau, took me in hand following the Guild initiation and suggested I write an orchestral piece. I had always wanted to write an overture to the Russian acmeist-poet Gumilev's "Gondla" – a high-flown post-romantic tale of Iceland in beautiful marblelike verse. I went to work happily and completed the job in little over a week. The overture, which I orchestrated hesitantly, was shown to Dirk Foch (the father of film actress Nina Foch), the colorful Dutch musician who had just formed the short-lived New York City Symphony, and that courageous man accepted it for performance. This was quite a jump from the intermezzo of my short-pants debut, and I sat in a blissful haze through the two rehearsals, and bowed from a box after the Carnegie Hall performance just before the more than meager applause died down. H. E. Krehbiel, the then all-powerful *New York Tribune* critic, called my "Gondla" a "farrago of atrocious noises," and most of the others dismissed it facetiously, but it was a start, and playing the misunderstood genius at so early an age was good fun.

The Foch, Gautier and Torpadie "breaks" gave me my first taste of the contemporary composer's plight; he gets a performance – then, perhaps, another performance – then a seemingly interminable lull. Thirty years ago most of us had the same trouble – performances led to *nothing* because the new-music market, as today, was extremely limited and there was far too much supply and far too little demand.

I remember sitting idly on a Central Park bench after the first and last performance of "Gondla," pondering my fate. There wasn't much pondering to do, really. It all amounted to the same thing: I must make music pay – but how? The pudgy

little man with a glistening checkbook who runs up to you after a brilliant *première*, wrings your hand and shouts, "Great! You've got what it takes – I'll give you ten thousand a year and here's five on account; just sit tight and write music," doesn't pop up these days, and I suspect he wasn't accessible in the days gone by – not unless his name was Ludwig of Bavaria and yours Wagner. So, back to synthetic gypsies I went, as accompanist to one of the tribe in a pseudo-Russian midtown night spot.

The first clash between the embryo Duke, the wage earner, and Dukelsky, would-be composer, occurred there and then: one evening when I was about to charge into the obnoxious "Otchi Tchornya," who should walk in but the impeccably clad Karol Szymanowski, a half-dozen composers in tow. This, as I presently learned, was to be a banquet tendered the Pole by his admiring colleagues – Alfredo Casella, Emerson Whithorne, Aaron Baron, Lazare Saminsky and several others. Words cannot describe my despair and mortification. Here were my senior contemporaries, proudly practicing their craft – nay, *my* craft! – and here was I, a young fellow composer, about to prostitute myself publicly. I closed my eyes, raced through the hateful "Otchi" at breakneck speed, causing the gypsy diva intense discomfort and annoyance, then excused myself and buttonholed Saminsky. "I'm so sorry," I stammered miserably. "Try and understand why I'm doing this." Saminsky shrugged his shoulders philosophically. "Don't worry, I understand perfectly. One must eat, mustn't one?" Nothing was more obvious than this truth, but Oh! how it hurt at the time.

The next morning, I had a long talk with Mother. I told her that the hellish humiliation of my lower-than-lowbrow jobs was not justifiable in view of the pitiabilities I received for them, that I would

seek and obtain something more remunerative and that I would forever renounce the *métier* of an eatery piano player. Dear Mother agreed completely, as she always did when my music and my musical progress were at stake. The “Otchi Tchornya” interlude proved to be an epilogue, and never again did I have to don a red silk blouse and black dress trousers (part of a dinner suit, purchased on Eighth Avenue for seven dollars) to entertain hiccuping customers. I called up Gershwin and asked him whether he would listen to some freshly written tunes of mine. George said he sure would and I was off to West 103rd Street, a new hope in my heart.

When not playing ping-pong on the ground floor with brothers Ira or Arthur, George could be found at his piano, playing tirelessly for hours, never practicing in the Czerny sense, just racing through new tunes, adding new tricks, harmonies, “first and second endings” and changing keys after each chorus. He was a born *improvisatore* yet never changed tempo, nor played rubato, the relentless 4/4 beat carrying him along – it was physically difficult for him to stop. This was just what he was doing when I walked in and sat down to listen. George’s sister, Frankie, a chubby chestnut-haired flapper, ran in, and after singing a chorus in a husky little voice, with “gestures,” ran out again. George then switched to a blues, closed his eyes and, pushing out his lips in an oddly Negroid manner, began intoning Ira’s lyrics. There was the “feel” of an incantation in George’s “vocals,” and no subsequent performer of his songs has ever invested them with such arresting fervor. Chorus No. 3 became a duet with mild, bespectacled Ira, who sang “harmony” to George’s lead and provoked his brother’s ire by screwing up an especially juicy passage. The music stopped, a heated argument ensued; this was my chance

and, by breaking up the argument, I hastily
slid onto the piano stool. Vernon
Duke

“O.K., Dukie, let’s have it,” said George, baring his teeth and lighting a pipe. The Brothers Gershwin called me Dukie long before George baptized me Duke. The first two tunes were shrugged off politely, but on hearing the third, George’s attitude changed. He took the pipe out of his mouth and ordered me to repeat the chorus. “That’s a funny chord you got in the second bar,” George said reflectively. “It’s good, though. It’s so good that I’ll tell you what I’ll do – take you to Max Dreyfus.” Max Dreyfus, as most everybody knew, was the musical-comedy potentate publisher. This was the real article at last.

– From Vernon Duke, *Passport to Paris* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1955), 76–77, 90–93; reprinted with permission from Kay Duke Ingalls.

Poem by Weldon Kees

A Good Chord on a Bad Piano

The fissures in the studio grow large.
Transplantings from the Rivoli, no doubt.
Such latter-day disfigurements leave out
All mention of those older scars that merge
On any riddled surfaces about.

Disgusting to be sure. On days like these,
A good chord on a bad piano serves
As well as shimmering harp-runs for the nerves.
F minor, with the added sixth. The keys
Are like old yellowed teeth; the pedal swerves;

The treble wires vibrate, break, and bend;
The padded mallets fly apart.
Both instrument and room have made a start.
Piano and scene are double to the end,
Like all the smashed-up baggage of the heart.

Weldon Kees (1914–1955) was a poet, painter, playwright, novelist, and jazz pianist. His poetry collections include *The Last Man* (1943), *The Fall of Magicians* (1947), and *Poems: 1947–1954* (1954). Reprinted from *The Collected Poems of Weldon Kees*, edited by Donald Justice, by permission of the University of Nebraska Press. © 1962, 1975, by the University of Nebraska Press. © renewed 2003 by the University of Nebraska Press.

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Inside back cover: Rock artist Joan Jett performs live at an outdoor concert in the early 1980s.
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