

AFRO-AMERICAN MUSIC AND THE MAINSTREAM

The story of how Afro-American music conquered the world lies behind so much of our culture that most everyone accepts its basic outline. West African ideas of pitch and rhythm enter the New World, encounter both repression and appreciation from white society, and emerge transformed in a family of sounds—blues, jazz, and rock—capable of expressing the essence of modern life with moving force. But the tale is so intertwined with America's ever-festering racial problems that the authors who have tried to write it down disagree, sometimes vehemently, on the details. Is it a history of exploitation—of black creators repeatedly ripped off by pale imitators and their record companies—or artistic triumph, as African-American musicians permanently reshaped the mainstream culture that tried to exclude them? For that matter, is Afro-American music fundamentally African or the hybrid its name suggests?

Simply describing the music or its history can mean taking sides. In **The Music of Black Americans: A History** (Norton, 1971), Eileen Southern, a professor emerita of music and Afro-American studies at Harvard, shows little interest in questions of artistic ownership, probably because she is too busy documenting an immense musical tradition. She meticulously traces lines of descent from West African music to slave songs and field hollers and on to ragtime, jazz, and rock 'n' roll, assembling a staggering catalogue of movements and ideas. But while the scope of Southern's work may leave little room for political questions, she cannot avoid them entirely. Her assertion that jazz sprang from the union of African music and European instrumentation and ensemble playing is a highly disputed point, not a matter of record.

Certainly others would agree about the music's mixed heritage. For jazz critic Albert Murray—**Stomping the Blues** (McGraw-Hill, 1976)—the blues is a distinctly American creation, "a synthesis of African and European elements, the product of an Afro-American sensibility in an American mainland situation." Eu-

ropean and African cultures met elsewhere in the world, Murray notes, and produced "calypso, rumba, the tango, the conga, the mambo, and so on, but not the blues." The blues idiom, therefore, "is not West African, nor is it European . . . it is Afro-U.S." Murray's sentiments echo those expressed by French musician and critic André Hodeir in **Jazz: Its Evolution and Essence** (Grove Press, 1953). Writing from the perspective of a musician who loves jazz and European classical music and can discuss both with passion and precision, Hodeir defines jazz as the product of blues and military marches. He even insists that "a comparison between the Negro-American music of the oldest recordings in the New Orleans style and the different varieties of African music shows immediately that they have fewer points in common than differences."

These are not, however, universally held beliefs. They would likely draw fire from historian Lawrence Levine and author/musician Ortiz M. Walton. In **Black Culture and Black Consciousness** (Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), Levine admits that black and white Americans living around the turn of the century sang many of the same songs, but he describes the blues themselves as thoroughly African, showing white cultural influence mainly in their emphasis on the solo performer—a rarity in African music. Walton, in **Music: Black, White, and Blue** (Morrow, 1972), goes one step farther, insisting that the blues and jazz have been tempered by "the American experience" but draw little from white American culture. Walton sees the relationship between black musicians and the mainstream as a steady pattern of exploitation and artistic theft. If his analysis unfairly brands white jazz musicians as, at best, record company tools and, at worst, shameless plagiarists, it is hard to deny his contention that the music industry has always preferred to promote fresh white faces, no matter who played the music first.

In fact, it may be more surprising that any chronicler of African-American music could go

on paper supporting the record industry, but sociologist Charles Keil manages to. In **Urban Blues** (Univ. of Chicago, 1966), he states that for all their faults, the record companies have introduced mainstream America to a vital piece of black culture and given a select few bluesmen an audience beyond the dreams of their musical ancestors. "Is the opportunity to tell your story to hundreds of thousands of people an exploitation?" he asks. Considering the impoverished, nomadic lives of such blues pioneers as Robert Johnson, detailed by journalist Peter Guralnick in **Searching for Robert Johnson** (Obelisk, 1989), Keil's answer that "many bluesmen would pay for the privilege" sounds like the poignant truth.

Questions of exploitation have dogged rock 'n' roll to a far greater extent than blues or jazz, in part because of the belief that rock 'n' roll was merely black music played by whites (or, as Walton would put it, the blues played badly). But in **The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll** (rev. ed., Pantheon, 1984), writer and independent record label executive Charlie Gillett argues that while rock 'n' roll may have begun life as repackaged rhythm and blues, it soon blended with country, swing, and other musical styles to create something truly new.

Others, such as rock critic Greil Marcus in **Mystery Train** (Dutton, 1975), have made the same case by focusing on Elvis Presley and his country roots. Although Gillett acknowledges Presley's role, he is far more interested in the career of Bill Haley, whose popular cover versions of such rhythm and blues tunes as "Shake, Rattle and Roll" left him open to charges of stealing riffs from lesser-known black musicians. Gillett shows how Haley carefully assembled his sound from elements of dixieland, rhythm and blues, and western swing, tinkering for years before finding the right mix. Haley didn't create rock 'n' roll, of course, but Gillett suggests that his willingness to experiment—shared by countless black and white contemporaries—did.

If the rock 'n' roll of Haley's day was inter-

racial, performed by blacks and whites for a mixed audience, its offspring, rock, was not. So it is no surprise that one of the few black musicians to gain entrance to rock's mostly white pantheon, Jimi Hendrix, should have had such a complicated relationship with the mainstream. Poet and biographer David Henderson, in **'Scuse Me While I Kiss the Sky: The Life of Jimi Hendrix** (Bantam, 1981), pays close attention to the role race played in shaping Hendrix's career—from his manager's decision to launch him first in Britain, where the locals were in love with Afro-American music and desperate for an "authentic" source, to the racial conflicts within Hendrix's band. But rather than view Hendrix as an isolated figure, a lone black musician surrounded by whites imitating blacks, Henderson sees him as part of a larger music, as "essentially" a blues man. While it was necessary for the publicists to put the rock banner on Jimi's music," Henderson writes, "the funky syncopated foundation and wide choices of phrasings and colorings rested in the blues tradition." Nor does Henderson present his subject as the sole modern disciple of that tradition. He describes the affinity Hendrix felt for such diverse but closely related artists as jazzman Roland Kirk and soul/funk groups War and Sly and the Family Stone. To Henderson, Hendrix was one black artistic hero out of many, all able to win acceptance through the sheer strength of their music.

If few authors can agree on how to interpret the relationship between Afro-American music and the mainstream, neither can many of the musicians. Witness the recent debates over white rappers such as Vanilla Ice, Marky Mark, and Snow. But that disagreement, within the musical community and among the authors who write about it, should be recognized for what it is—a sign of life. After all, the only artistic traditions that provoke no debate are static and dead.

—David Baker

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