

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.

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

GERALD EARLY, a Fellow of the American Academy since 1997 and Chair of the Academy's Council, is the Merle Kling Professor of Modern Letters at Washington University in St. Louis. His books include *A Level Playing Field: African American Athletes and the Republic of Sports* (2011), *One Nation Under a Groove: Motown and American Culture* (rev. ed., 2004), and *This is Where I Came In: Black America in the 1960s* (2003).

1950s and 1960s, his “wall of sound” or “the Wagnerian approach to rock ’n’ roll”: in effect, he intimidated, 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. Gerald
Early

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.

Gerald
Early

- 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.