

AMERICAN MUSIC: A historiography

This historiography will attempt to view the changes in musical styles between 1945-1955 from as many different perspectives as possible. Therefore the following readings reflect the wide variety of discourses on American music. The selections will look at big band music, rock & roll music, the origins of jazz, the influence of blues, and a few individual record labels."

INTRODUCTION

The historiography of American music in the twentieth century experienced more musical change than any other place or time in the history of music. The era of particular from 1945-1955 was when Big Band music fell and Rock & Roll rose. In order to access how this quick change, encompassing two radically different styles in music, occurred one must be able to understand the characteristics of both styles of music within their sociological frames. One must look at the issues that occurred in and around society as well as developments, which occurred within the music industry at the time. When considering the music industry, one must consider the various styles of music, which were competing for control of the charts. One must also look at how these various styles of music influenced each other. However, an element which is often over looked is the listening experience which a person needs to understand these musical changes. One must understand the music in terms of its influence in a 'live' context. Therefore, in order to fully grasp and understand what the past generations experienced in the late forties and early fifties, one must experience the music in the same fashion that it was introduced.

This historiography will attempt to view the changes in musical styles between 1945-1955 from as many different perspectives as possible. Therefore the following readings reflect the wide variety of discourses on American music. The selections will look at Big Band music, Rock & Roll music, the origins of Jazz, the influence of Blues, and a few individual record labels Ortiz Walton published *Music: Black, White & Blue; Sociological Survey To The Use And Misuse Of Afro-American Music* in which he sought to illustrate the use and misuse of Afro-American music while studying the phenomena in a sociological context. He wanted to go beyond the studies which lacked causation by looking at cultural and sociological matrix to demonstrate music as a force which had an existence of its own. He did not wish to look at black music's history but rather at its development. Walton hoped that his book helped the reader go beyond superficial music fads and imitations by leading the audience to understand and appreciate black music more thoroughly. Walton stated that the art of listening to music was composed of an audio-tactile world of intense subtlety.

Walton is ideal to start this discussion because he traced black music's roots back in Africa by beginning his work in the nineteenth century. He believed that collective participation were the seeds of cultural development, which germinated and sustained tradition. This was, in his view, what allowed African traditions to evolve and blend into American society in the midst of slavery as they made their journey across the Atlantic.

The use of the environment was viewed as the most important aspect of the development of African music because most instruments were made from the environment such as

drums, which were made from tree barks, or horns, which were made from various animals' horns. However, once in America, Anti drum laws kept Afro-Americans from playing their instruments and therefore the function of playing instruments was transferred to their body hands and feet which gave rise to American dance such as Jazz and Tap.

Walton also discussed various forms of music and mentioned blues as one of the earliest forms of music to influence the American scene. The Blues was the style of music which slaves used to express their grievances, and often focused on one man and his instrument. Blues was a style of music, which allowed one to pass his life's experiences and ecstasies onto the audience.

Jazz music, as Walton mentioned was an American art, which grew out of an ethnically and culturally mixed New Orleans. Jazz music was an element, which gave people within the music community, commonalities. In effect, Jazz was cross-status and its effects transcended the hiatus of color, race and status. The jazz age, which occurred in the twenties however, caused the decline of New Orleans as the most important jazz center when various jazz musicians began migrating to New York. Moreover, when the Original Dixieland Jazz Band arrived on the scene, record labels began promoting the white style of music, which forced blacks to adopt to a style, which they had invented prior. However some black musicians succeeded in piercing through discrimination by sheer persona and talent. One such musician, who Walton dedicates an entire chapter to was Duke Ellington, who single handily promoted black culture.

Finally, in relation to the time period of the forties and fifties, Walton discussed bebop, which was born out of the deterioration of the intimate connection between jazz and dance. Dance contributed to a relationship between music which focused their energies on a dance beat, during from the teens into the fifties. Dance bands transformed dance into a rage when big band gained prominence in the early thirties. However once bebop entered the Jazz scene the role of the dancer became secondary to the listener and therefore, the musician was no longer tied down by the dance beat. The crowds then searched for another style of music, which they could dance to and that style of music was Rock & Roll. Therefore, in order to access Big Band's success one must look at the characteristics which made the music appealing in the thirties and forties.

George T. Simon, published *The Big Bands* which discussed the relationship between the structure and characteristics of the music. Simon carefully lists Big Band's most appealing factors, its development, and its fall. Structurally, Big Band's sounds and styles were built around the band's leaders and their instruments as, for example; Benny Goodman's clarinet, Tommy Dorsey's trombone, Harry James' trumpet, and Gene Krupa's drums. The musical directors, who were often the leaders themselves, established how a musical style would be presented, what kind of sound the band would have, and who would play the role of sideman in the band. The style, sounds, and side acts in a Big Band contributed to its musical success by stressing simple and easily understood dance rhythms along with its ability to possess you, when heard live.

Big Band music's survival depended on three elements: they had to tour regularly to be seen live; their sounds had to be danceable; and there had to be unity within the band. Big

Band's fall which consequently led to Rock & Roll's rise, came about during World War II when Big Band music was robbed of its most appealing factor a community of musicians playing danceable rhythms, live. Essentially World War II helped bring about Big Band's fall by bleeding the industry of its musicians, grounding Big Band tours, and by creating psychological changes that caused the industry to divide, thus shattering the unity. During the war Big Bands opted to transmit music across the airwaves to dance halls across the country, thus using radio for exposure, while accepting lower salaries, and hoping to make more money when they returned on the road. Even though there were 200 Big Bands in the 40s, wartime demands, such as manpower for war, deprived the Big Band industry of some of its major bandleaders.

However, the musicians and singers who escaped the wartime draft saw the opportunity to exploit the industry by demanding higher salaries. Higher salaries then made it too expensive for Big Bands to resume going on the road after the war, because the bands were forced to ask too much money to pay musicians, which caused an economic rupture. As Big Bands began looking for work, in film and in large concert halls like Carnegie Hall, the industry's appeal of playing in front of a small audience, in an intimate setting, was lost. This essentially made Big Band music no different in experience from other styles of music, making it passive, thus allowing Rock and Roll, which demanded fewer musicians and less people to pay, rose.

Sentimental moods, during the war also caused a dramatic change shifting the emphasis from Big Band instrumental music to singers' vocals. People often preferred to listen to Frank Sinatra, Doris Day, Rosemary Clooney, Tony Bennett, Perry Como, and Peggy Lee. Thus by the end of the war, the music world was a singer's world. The change of emphasis was caused by the war because people had a lot to say to loved ones who either left for the battleground or came back from it. Therefore, singers, who expressed simple messages, as opposed to instrumental Big Band music of the thirties, were favored as one could just dance in a person's arm and listen to Frank Sinatra or Doris Day as they expressed these feelings.

The fall of Big Band occurred over time. World War II contributed to the fall by disrupting the music industry's continuity and by creating divisions within the industry. However, the post World War era also played its role in Big Band music's fall by introducing a new form of Jazz, called Bebop. This trend of smaller bands began during World War II when traveling was difficult and salaries began to rise. Bandleaders opted for creating trios, quartets, quintets, of which Louis Armstrong and the Hot Fives is a good example.

Bebop was a manifestation of musicians who wanted solo space in their concert performances. The musicians who escaped the draft began acting like spoiled brats, calling for solo space, thus destroying Big Band music's unity. Bebop was Jazz music in an intellectualized sense as very few people could understand it let alone dance to the music.

Big Band music was the last time that Jazz music dominated the Billboard charts. In fact the Jazz music of the forties changed the relationship between the people and the music. Jazz music in essence, marginalized itself by transforming its sounds, which alienated the

mainstream crowd and attracted music listeners. Stanley Dance, who for his part, published *Jazz Era: The Forties* discussed Jazz music's development in the forties. He focused his discussion, very briefly, on Big Bands by describing their origins which came from bands like Duke Ellington's enlarged band at the Cotton Club In Harlem; Earl Hines Big Band in Chicago; and Louis Armstrong at the Savoy, in Harlem.

Bebop, he states, was so complicated to perform, with its improvised manner, that a movement created a new form of Jazz called Cool Jazz, which was a toned down version of Bebop. In essence, because nobody could understand the music, let alone dance to it, many audiences turned their backs on Jazz music, clearing the road for Rock and Roll music. Although Bebop filtered down through the entertainment and advertisement industries, the music was never fully accepted by the public. Bebop developed when a new generation of musicians got tired of repetition during the swing era. Bebop essentially grew out of the after hour jam sessions, which developed during World War II.

Dance then stated the hardships, which the music industry in general had been through such as recording limitations and disputes amongst the federation of musicians. The recording industry was forced to cut back on its recording of Jazz music in general because both the military and recording industry needed shellac, and since military concerns got priority record production was disrupted. This was coupled with the fact that disputes among the Federation of musicians led to a recording ban from 1942-1944 leaving record production, which represented documentation, at a stand still.

Dance in essence focused his discussion on issues, that were just slightly discussed, which other survey text did not discuss, for example, the lack of, shellac, which kept Jazz music from being recorded? This issue may seem insignificant, but when coupled with Feather's discussion on the origin of Jazz music and the lack of documentation, shellac gains a lot more implications to the history of Jazz music. Dance also described some of the characteristics, which made Bebop unappealing to mainstream crowds. The most significant change however, was Bebop's disassociation with dance.

The importance of the rupture between dance and music caused Big Bands appeal to fall and this rupture led people to seek new danceable rhythms, which contributed, to the upcoming rise of Rock & Roll. People turned their backs on Bebop's crazy rhythms and therefore led audiences to look for another style of music, which they could dance to. Charlie Gillett's work in *The Sound Of The City: The Rise And Fall Of Rock and Roll* discussed Rock & Roll in terms of the development of a black market through the increase of record sales. Furthermore, the introduction of all major record labels, which promoted black artists, developed between 1945-1955. In fact Gillett stated that a Negro market did not exist until the end of the Second World War when record companies, such as King records in Cincinnati, Peacock in Houston, Chess in Chicago, and Savoy in Newmark began to promote black music. Furthermore, to coincide with these new outlets for black artist, trade journals such as *Metronome* and *Downbeat* began publishing more and more articles on black culture. This was not to mention the likes and importance of disc jockeys such as Allen Freed.

However, despite these influences, by 1953 the Negro market in record sales was only 5.7%. The difficulties in the marketing of Negro music occurred because the first singer to obtain a hit record, in the upcoming Rock & Roll age, nation wide was Bill Haley who was signed by Decca from Essex. He was a white singer and his style was that of Big Band. His appearance on the music scene occurred at a time when teenagers began to enjoy themselves more than they ever did after World War II. Despite this atmosphere after the war, Rock & Roll still had to cope with being labeled as having too much sexuality and sounding too much like Negroes. Rock & Roll developed out of various parts in the United States under five different styles. Rock & Roll- northern band like Bill Haley, Dance Blues- which developed out of the New Orleans, Country Rock- which developed out of Memphis, Rhythm and Blues- which developed out of Chicago and, Vocal Group Rock & Roll- which was not concentrated to any one region in particular.

Gillett then shifted his discussion to the tendency by major companies such as RCA, A&R, Decca, Mercury, which had previously focused on Rhythm and Blues, to produce Rock and Roll. In fact these companies were responsible for taking the first steps towards developing a Rock & Roll market. Blues was the single most important influence on Rock and Roll. Rhythm and Blues was then termed signifying that the singer was black and he or she sang for black audiences. Blues was not the only an important factor however, dance and its danceable rhythms were mentioned as in Walton's book, as being the element, which distinguished post war Jazz from Rhythm and Blues. The case being that as post war Jazz focused on the listener, Rhythm and Blues focused on making its rhythms danceable.

However what we are discussing, thus far, was the historical interpretation as described by whites. Arnold Shaw wrote history from a black perspective. He raised an issue, which was not mentioned in Walton's or Gillett's books, who was writing the history and for whom was the black music being played? Arnold Shaw published *Black Popular Music in America: From the Spirituals, Minstrels, And Ragtime to Soul, Disco, And Hip-hop* which discussed the history of black music from a black perspective.

Shaw set out to present history from a black perspective by illustrating black contributions in music at different points in time, which were barely mentioned or avoided altogether. He stated the five types of black music, which emerged and changed the mainstream forever. 1843 was the first performance of the Virginia Minstrel. 1871 was the University Jubilee Singers go on their first tour spirituals. 1899 was the publication of Maple Leaf Rag ragtime. 1917-18 was Original Dixieland Band and King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band Jazz. Mamie Smith recording of Crazy Blues Blues. Similarly, in the Swing era, white bands were prominent when in reality Swing had been invented during the twenties by blacks. In this process Shaw singled out the sounds and feeling tones which allowed black music to enter the mainstream at various times.

Shaw, at numerous times, stated that the commercialization of black music by the whites effected everybody in the long run. As blacks developed new styles of music, which was then reinterpreted by whites, the inter-mingling of these changes affected everybody. This, in essence, as he was writing from a black perspective, has caused blacks, over time, to disregard the musical contributions of white musicians. In essence, Shaw's

writing on the perspectives of history based from a black perspective illustrated the multiple divisions, which occurred in the music industry at the time.

However, one could now look at other music histories through the eyes of some major record labels, which were founded to promote black music. Therefore its only fitting that we continue with a look at an alternative interpretation of history from the perspective of an individual record label.

Dick Shurman, Billy Vera, Jim O'neal, and Mary Katherine Aldin wrote a collection of articles, which were only available through the purchase of the multi CD box set, called *The Mercury Blues 'N Rhythm Story 1945-1955*. These articles discussed the label's history in the era of 1945-1955. The booklet of articles emphasized the regionalism of Mercury Blues. The story of the record label was divided into regions; Midwest blues, Southwest blues, West Coast blues, and East Coast blues.

This introduction focused on describing the turning points in this record label's history. The label's musical focus has always been a format which emphasized musical variety including Blues, Pop, Jazz, Country, Polka, Gospel, Rhythm and Blues, Rock & Roll, Doo Wop, Soul, and Funk. However the company could not compete with the larger more established record labels in 1945 so Mercury opted for producing records that were mainly R & B. In essence, Mercury decided to compete with the larger established companies by producing a different type of music. Within two years of its birth Mercury was already amongst the top five. Midwest Blues, written by Jim O'neal, discussed how Chicago, in particular, was regionally developed and enhanced by the birth of Mercury records, in terms of the promotion of black music. Mercury chose to produce records of Chicago's deprived south side population as opposed to rural Mississippi Delta Blues such as *Muddy Waters*. In the Southwest Region article, written by Mary Katherine Aldin, discussed Mercury's search for talent in cities like Houston and New Orleans, where Mercury soon absorbed all other independent labels. The difference was slight, when one listened to the music but the importance was the emphasis on regions. The same could be said of the West Coast Blues, written by Dick Shurman, where Mercury was key in developing the talent in that area. However, the authors mentioned that Mercury was often overlooked in its role in the development of R & B in the various regions as stated above. The major difference and main discovery in this collection of essays was the mention of the peculiarities of New York's music industry. East Coast Blues, written by Billy Vera, states that all American Jazz is Blues based. Secondly, the competitiveness of New York kept the city from being associated to any one style of music. The fierce competition of the city created by the intense migration of artists made the domination of any one style of music impossible. In New York, in essence, the ultimate goal was to be unique.

These essays shed a lot of light in explaining the context which kept New York in a league of its own as, one compared the various musical styles which accompanied the discography and music in the articles, as opposed to other regions in the United States. Furthermore, we were given an interpretation of history through the eyes of one record label. In fact, most of the record labels, which produced black artists, such as Mercury, Specialty, Sun Records, Chess Blues, and Motown, were all born in the post war period between 1945-1955.

Billy Vera, who also wrote, *The Mercury Story 1945-1955* has also written *The Specialty Story* who discussed the rise of Specialty records as the leading force in the promotion of Rock & Roll. It focused on the criteria that were used to select the collection of five CDs, which accompanied the booklet. The booklet made important remarks about Billboard magazine, which cautioned its users when consulting its statistics. It stated that Billboard's race charts were inaccurate indicators of relative sales. An example was given where a particular song may have been number one for many weeks in a row in several cities, which did not even appear in the R & B charts. Therefore the booklet made reference to Billboard while cautioning its readers about these circumstances.

Furthermore Bill Vera decided to use Billboard because he stated that the only articles available on Specialty Records were the interviews which he had had with Art Rube, the owner of the record company. The reading singled out Specialty records most significant contribution in terms of Rock & Roll by stating that it was the only record company to fully promote Rock & Roll from the era of race records in the forties to Rock & Roll in the fifties. The tendency was for other labels like Mercury or Chess to focus on R & B or blues. The book, in essence, opened some insight into the company's contribution to Rock & Roll. It also provided the first notes of caution against Billboard magazine.

Furthermore, and perhaps the most significant contribution of this booklet was not the writing it provided but the five CD collection which accompanied it providing a wealth of artists and songs which are only available on obscure albums which, are most probably, not available on CD. Furthermore the music selection gives credit to all the other artists other than Sam Cook or Little Richard, who were prominent artists to rise out of Specialty records, who contributed to the era of Rock & Roll.

In ending this historiography it is appropriate to look at three myths, as Leonard Feather has described them, which surround Jazz music's history. Leonard Feather published *The Encyclopedia of Jazz* whose discussion revolved around three myths about Jazz, which have dominated Jazz historians' discourse. Feather discussed the myths which state that Jazz music originated in Africa, secondly, that Jazz music came from the New Orleans, and thirdly the racial theory, which was nurtured by French critics since the thirties.

Feather stated that New Orleans was not the center of the origins of Jazz although it did have its importance. He stated that because artists like Louis Armstrong and King Oliver originated from New Orleans it has been documented as the origins of Jazz, when in fact too many recordings were either missing or not made, thus making it impossible to ever know where Jazz music knew its beginnings. Secondly Feather stated that the misconception about Jazz as originating from Africa was a half-truth. He stated that Blues, which was the lifeblood of Jazz, was developed in an American context where it has been nurtured melodically and harmonically. The third misconception was that Jazz music was mostly based upon the development of music from within the black community. In essence, Feather states that the music was as much white as it was black and that its development occurred in both camps, although the development was racially segregated.

Finally, Feather provided an interesting history of the development of Jazz from its development when it was originally called Jass, to Jazz in the fifties where the first

volume of the encyclopedia ended. Jass was essentially associated to the Dixie and Brass Bands of the teens. Feather then described the various turning points, which lead to the development of Swing music. He termed "BIG", within the musical genre Big Band, as being associated with the white bands which musically meant anything with two cornets, a trombone, and three saxophones. Big Band's name "Swing Music", came from Duke Ellington's 1932 song "It Don't Mean A Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing", which provided swing music with its anthem as well as a new name for Jazz music. Simultaneously, however Boogie-woogie also surfaced in the mid-thirties, which originated from rent parties given for landlords. By this time Jazz had reached a stalemate where it seemed to stop evolving until, Bebop came along and changed the way Jazz would sound forever. Jazz did get recognition as an art form but also paid the price as Rock & Roll, which focused on a dance beat as opposed to the listener, led Jazz music's, dominance in the charts, to an abrupt end.

In conclusion, the music industry suffered from instability because several elements and forces collided within a time frame of ten years, which saw the fall of Big Band and the Rise of Rock & Roll. In essence, a conflict between Big Band and Bebop erupted over the musician's freedom to play for the listener or the dancer. However while these two forces were colliding Rock & Roll rose which consequently knocked both of those styles of music out of the Pop charts. Therefore the element of dance in relation to music in the period of 1945-1955 played a crucial role in determining the kind of music which would rule the charts or would fade away. Secondly, the question of where Jazz music came from and who contributed most to the Jazz era in terms of race has also been a major question in the historiography of twentieth century music. Finally, the comparisons of different styles of music are always on the condition that a fair amount of music listening has been completed before one attempts to write and research about such a topic.