

## Chapter 14: "Music" Wesley Morris

- I. Motown
    - a. This genre focused on the angst of individual life and love rather than on the politics of race
  - II. Jazz
    - a. This earlier musical form emanating from New Orleans
    - b. The racist project of keeping White America in a position of dominance necessitated separating Black music from the rest of music. Jazz needed to not become mainstream but always in the category of "Black."
    - c. This gave jazz a mystique that attracted Whites
    - d. Whites appeared to get into the jazz tradition in a "second hand" way.
      - i. Whites would play the music invented by Blacks
      - ii. And listen to it in whites-only clubs
      - iii. Paul Whiteman, a white band leader, was dubbed the "king of jazz"
      - iv. By the 1960's jazz and Black-originated music was widely popular with Whites
        1. Sam Cooke blended secular and religious music that proved popular with all races
        2. A good example of the lyrical prose that is commonplace in 1619 Project: "An innovative singer and songwriter like Sam Cooke imagined a pop music that induced hyperventilating yet never dared remove its choral robe. It was lush, impassioned, and nestled in the palatable harmonies of 1940s and 1950s serenades and doo-wop singing. Neither hot jazz nor fiery sermon but a dozen roses, a milkshake with two straws. Cooke's arrangements were a perfect fusion between the sacred and the secular, between robust Blackness and the American songbook's high snuggle era. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Cooke embodied Black pop singing's seamless transition from wailing choirboy to romantic heat source. source. (Hannah-Jones, Nikole . [The 1619 Project](#) (p. 361). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.)
- III. Motown
  - a. The author sees Motown as a merger of sacred and secular. "A whole dang weekend in 3 minutes."
  - b. Motown usured Black artists into stardom
  - c. Motown's founder [Berry Gordy](#) made Motown mainstream by marketing singers as elegant and socially smart.
  - d. Motown was wildly successful with Whites and Blacks
- IV. Black music and dance is really the essence of American culture
- V. Slavery
  - a. Enslaved Blacks used music to counter hopelessness and depression
  - b. Brought rhythm traditions from Africa

- c. Colonial Christianity emphasized the melody element in music; blacks emphasized rhythm and harmony
  - d. The tradition of the ring shout merged singing, chanting, harmony, and recollection of prominent Biblical stories
  - e. Enslaved Africans sang while they worked and while they were not permitted to learn to read, they conveyed “biblical” faith through music in the fields.
  - f. Implicit in the work songs was a yearning for liberation, freedom from bondage. These songs were the first spirituals. Those work songs pleaded for deliverance and were sung in defiance of atrocity.
  - g. The songs were not committed to notation and were never sung the same way twice.
    - i. Committing them to musical notation was a post civil war project.
    - ii. In 1867 “Slave Songs of the United States,” a collection of 136 songs were transcribed and assembled by the white abolitionists.
  - h. Ella Sheppard, a Black woman. was involved in both the preservation of this music and its mindful reproduction in concert venues.
    - i. The Fisk University singers started with Ella Sheppard
    - ii. The recorded slave songs of course lacked the rough hewn character of the slave situation.
- VI. Minstrel Shows: Blacks and Whites imitating Blacks as entertainers
- a. Slaves sang for and danced for their enslavers
  - b. Blackface and minstrel shows were White admiration and appropriation of Black culture.
  - c. Before the 1830’s, upper class Americans imported European entertainments. American popular culture, music etc. for ordinary people began with the minstrel shows.
  - d. Minstrel shows reached their zenith during the difficult years surrounding the Civil War. Here again is the theme of juxtaposition, music countering struggle.
  - e. Daddy Rice an actor in the 1830’s saw a Black man singing while grooming a horse and came up with the idea of Black face. He also launched the mascot Jim Crow which he used in one of his first songs.
  - f. Blackface and minstrel shows were popular. P T Barnum picked up on them and included them in his productions.
  - g. The shows went on for 6 decades and served to normalize racist impressions of Black people and culture.
  - h. These were popular largely in the North.
  - i. Stephen Foster composed songs for the minstrel show, songs which are very familiar today. These all conveyed an impression of Black life.
  - j. This was cultural appropriation par excellence. Whites who had never been in the South, merged Irish music with an image of Black people and Black life. The author says that here the American Rock Band was born.
  - k. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin was published in 1852 and influenced the minstrel shows both to incorporate some of her characters and themes into their productions which sometimes ridiculed the novel.

- I. Overall, the minstrel shows, entirely White, were a huge phenomenon. Virtually, all entertainers were involved and probably adopted blackface at some point.
- VII. Black entertainers
  - a. Whites in blackface ironically put Black entertainers out of work.
  - b. Story of P.T. Barnum putting black on a Black child's face to disguise him as a white disguised as a Black.
- VIII. White audiences accept only orators onstage
  - a. Oratory, beginning with Frederick Douglass, was a kind of anti-minstrelsy.
  - b. It could be dignified
  - c. Oratory in churches has been an exceptionally strong part of Black performance.
  - d. A big problem today and since the end of minstrelsy has been its legacy of inviting criticism of any Black performer as selling out or being a puppet.
  - e. Is their Blackness an act? Is the act under white control? Is their Blackness detectable or sufficiently, what, soulful?
  - f. Berry Gordy's Motown Label is certainly subject to this criticism.
  - g. Old Town Road sounds like it might be heard at a square dance, even though sung by Lil Naz X.
- IX. Karma
  - a. The popularity of Black musical forms is a kind of subtle payback for slavery and white supremacy.
  - b. The author sees the merger of Black and White cultural/musical forms as the first real success at integration, despite some ironies.
- X. Black music today
  - a. Black music, despite its merger with Whiteness, retains distinct qualities
    - i. It can't be entirely captured on stage
    - ii. It entails noise, strange sounds that are not quite notes from instruments or voice
    - iii. It entails syncopation, improvisation, voice tricks, and call and response
    - iv. Ultimately Black music is an extension of the singing in the cotton fields by oppressed laborers. And White people, the enslavers who have never quite released their thirst for dominance, will never be able to appropriate it.

Summary: Chapter 14: Music: Wesley Morris This brilliant chapter explored not only the high points in American Black musical history, but also one of its great mysteries—its popularity and appropriation by Whites. From its beginnings in the cotton fields as an expression of the woes, hopes and faith of the enslaved, Black music was oddly attractive to Whites as well. Enslaved Blacks were forced to entertain their masters. By far the most interesting element in this chapter is Morris' discussion of Black face and minstrel shows. These were an odd amalgam of art and entertainment conditioned by racism. The minstrel shows were presented by Whites mimicking Blacks. These were so popular and endured so long that they left a lasting imprint on American culture. The only other substantial form of entertainment for Whites were European concert musicians and classical music. Much of the music created by Blacks—spirituals, blues, jazz, Motown—needed to be sanitized and made palatable for

White tastes. Motown was wildly successful because of its classiness in comparison with whatever Whites were listening to. This merger of Black-originated music and dancing and White tastes and prejudices is really the mainstream of American popular culture and the one place where integration has most advanced.