American music writing: an unruly history

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Abstract

Popular music writing has made for strange colleagues and quickly lost legacies. I want to sketch some of them and suggest how they continue to influence the US version of popular music studies, arguably more so in our moment than in the previous period that codified an academic approach. I’ll be anecdotal, alive to particulars of language, affiliation, method and form rather than attempting a quantification. Ranging from William Billings in 1770 to Daphne Brooks in 2021, I’ll explore how such key framings as vernacular, sentimental and literary have shaped the nature of books on song. My hope is that, in synthesizing the larger history, I can suggest why so often this work could be characterized as, to use one of Robert Palmer’s favourite words, unruly.

At the University of Illinois, Bruno Nettl related in his memoir Encounters in Ethnomusicology (Nettl 2002), he joined a poker game with a colleague even friendlier towards popular music as a subject, musicologist Charles Hamm. The two set up a plenary on pop topics at a joint American Musicological Society/Society for Ethnomusicology gathering in 1971, with Albert Goldman, Charles Keil and bossa nova scholar Gerard Béhague, irritating more established scholars. Researching a book on US popular music books (Weisbard 2021), I came across this anecdote and wondered about linkages. Hamm, Nettl and Keil were three influential scholars rarely in the same conversation, Goldman the scorned biographer of Elvis Presley and John Lennon, and why didn’t I know the name Gerard Béhague?

Hitchcock’s *Music in the United States: A Historical Introduction* (nicknamed MinUS by its author) kept tabs, across four revisions (Hitchcock 2000), of the unfolding literature that its author administered. Hitchcock, a music PhD who had studied in Paris with Nadia Boulanger, early noted: ‘we know less about our own music than about that of western Europe’ and pledged to cover ‘pop songs as well as art songs’ (Hitchcock 2000, preface, n.p.). His influential formulation, declaring a US musical schism between ‘cultivated’ and ‘vernacular’ modes, drew on John Kouwenhoven’s *Made in America* (1948) and anticipated Lawrence Levine’s *Highbrow/Lowbrow –* interdisciplinary American studies. However, he remained Boulanger’s pupil, giving a full chapter only to Charles Ives, the composer who reworked the popular from the art margins. Through the final edition, edgy composers took priority; guitar symphonies by Glenn Branca got more space than Jimi Hendrix.

Hitchcock then co-edited the decidedly plus-sized *New Grove Dictionary of American Music*: 900 contributors, over 5000 topics (Hitchcock and Sadie 1986). Hamm wrote the popular music overview. Another *Times* critic, John Rockwell, assigned pop-rock entries to peers such as Greil Marcus, Dave Marsh, Jon Pareles and Ken Tucker. Paul Oliver spoke to blues, Gunther Schuller to jazz, Bill Malone to country, Arnold Shaw and Henry Pleasant to pop, Gerald Bordman to musical theatre, Edward Berlin to ragtime, Crawford to psalmody. Judith Tick addressed the role of women; Eileen Southern the African American tradition; Nettl ethnomusicology. Rock critics were asked to accept stiff prose edits (Robert Christgau withdrew from the project), which made it fun to see them try to elide the restrictions: Marcus (pp. 532–3) called Creedence Clearwater Revival ‘as far-seeing an account of the limitations and opportunities of the American way of life as the rock idiom has produced’.

The constraints of the enterprise emerged in the minstrelsy entry, which positioned blackface in opposition to the genteel tradition but never attempted the reading of racial power dynamics that Robert Cantwell (1984) had already attempted with *Bluegrass Breakdown* and Eric Lott would soon turn into *Love and Theft* (1993). Cultural studies approaches – Cage’s sexuality in relationship to his music, popular genres as constructed forms to unpack – were not part of this A–Z. Instead, ‘Amerigrove’ marked the end of three decades of exploration ushered in by Gilbert Chase’s 1987 *America’s Music* (Chase contributed a symbolic entry, on populist composer and pioneering music historian Arthur Farwell), studies of canonical figures and jazz swelling into takes on multiple genres. Never had so much vernacular knowledge been put down in one place. American music had almost become a field.

Without attempting a sustained contrast, I’ll note editor Charles Hiroshi Garrett’s eight volume *Grove Dictionary of American Music, 2nd edn*, which in 2013 supplanted the earlier effort. The preface stressed how thoroughly country music coverage had expanded in the now 9000 entries by 1500 contributors. Yet if the topics had become even more populist, the steering figures were now all academics, from Frances Aparicio on Latinx music to Sherrie Tucker on jazz, Loren Kajikawa on hip-hop or Jacqueline Warwick on post-1945 pop among many section editors. The legacy of critics and non-university types was pushed into the background of many a bibliography. Custody of American music had been given over to music departments.

The networks that long supported writing on American popular music have begun fading from memory now – Béhague, a student of Chase’s and colleague of Nettl’s, who would go on to found *Latin American Music Review*, for example. In this article, I want to explore some of them and suggest how they continue to influence the US version of popular music studies, arguably more so in our moment than
in the previous period that codified an academic approach. Connecting themes in my overview, *Songbooks* (Weisbard 2021), as well as registering work done since that book was turned in, I’ll be anecdotal, alive to particulars of language, affiliation, method and form rather than attempting a quantification. My hope is that in synthesizing the larger history I can suggest why so often this work could be characterized as, to use one of Robert Palmer’s favourite words, unruly.

**Vernacular voices and the books that contained them**

Writing about American vernacular music, from William Billings’s *New-England Psalm-singer* a quarter-millennium ago, has been a twisted sister of European discourse: ‘every composer his own carver’, Billings declared in 1770, then got Paul Revere to create the frontispiece for a collection whose ‘Chester’ became a revolutionary anthem. From one regard – the 1950s Gilbert Chase regard – Billings was an American rebel who ‘gloried in his musical independence’. From another – 1990s Richard Crawford – he was a working songwriter who learned how to meet the needs of singing congregations: the tune ‘Amherst’ ‘owed its circulation chiefly to its metrical structure: It is cast in the pattern 6.6.6.4.4.4.4., the so-called hallelujah meter… [‘Amherst’] was chosen by many compilers because it best filled the hallelujah meter pigeon hole’ (Crawford 2000, p. 139). Michael Broyles (2004) noted Billings’s fascination with tales of crime and broken families, a tabloid orientation we might equate, via Dale Cockrell (1997), with early blackface performers such as George Washington Dixon. The first century-plus of American songbooks favoured psalmody and shape-note collections, but also blackface verses sold as songsters to create a profession for Stephen Foster, a mix of sacred and profane songbooks. Daniel Goldmark (2015) has traced how-to songwriting guides as a Tin Pan Alley staple. In one such, ‘In the Baggage Coach Ahead’ penner Gussie Davis advised: ‘you must always wear your hair long enough to show people that you are the real article’ (Rossiter 1898, p. 12).

The vernacular moved in the 1920s to 1950s from dialect or theatre slang on a page to individual voices captured on record, radio and film, so songbooks responded in kind. Artists and scenes were rendered as an iconic, jazzy modernity. There was a mainstream layer: the flapper fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald (1920, 1925); the slick magazine criticism of Gilbert Seldes (1924); the Tin Pan Alley histories of Isaac Goldberg (1930); the biography Algonquin Round Table member Alexander Woolcott (1925) gave Irving Berlin and the memoir Sophie Tucker (1945) wrote herself; the hack music surveys of ‘tune detective’ Sigmund Spaeth (1925, 1927, 1933, 1936, 1948) and founding middlebrow David Ewen (1944, 1947, 1957, 1961, 1964, 1977); the infinitely adaptable musical novel *Show Boat*, by Edna Ferber (1926) – ephemeral stage lights and eternal river. Jazz and popular music became institution worthy: Marshall Stearns’s Institute of Jazz Studies; Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis’s genre history of ragtime (1966); Américo Paredes’s University of Texas-sponsored folklore of Mexican borderlands *corridos* (1958) via an outlaw story that became a movie; Chase’s insistence to music teachers that America’s *Music* was a vernacular tale.

Other work pushed, with mixed success (but books can last), to centre the vernacular on Black American expression, the new essence of sacred and profane. Louis Armstrong’s trumpet solos filled two books (Armstrong 1927a, b), but his speaking voice filled others, from memoirs (Armstrong 1935, 1954) to the jazz criticism primer...
Jazzmen (Ramsey and Smith 1939) and the collective oral history *Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya* (Shapiro and Hentoff 1955). Zora Neale Hurston, at times partnering with Langston Hughes and Alain Locke, established vernacular – as performed language, ‘lyin’ up a nation’ – at the root of a Black studies perspective that could stretch from anthropology (*Mules and Men* 1935) to fiction (1937). With Ethel Waters (1951) setting a raw tone in her memoir that Billie Holiday’s (2006) soon exceeded, Black musicianship became a ‘cabaret blues’, to amplify Michael Denning’s term in his Popular Front study (1996). Appreciations extended from modernist jazz critic Barry Ulanov (1946), alert to Duke Ellington’s farflung ambitions, to *New Yorker* jazz critic Whitney Balliett’s parsing of the music’s rising brow status (1959) and even Jack Kerouac’s use of jazz to exemplify the Beat Generation as, in Joel Dinerstein’s distillation (2017), a kind of literary ‘Lester Leaps In’. Combine *On the Road* (1957) with the grainy voice of folk singer Woody Guthrie’s *Bound for Glory* (1943) and a rebel vernacular was primed for a new round of white love and theft.


Then punk spat at what rock had become, disco records were blown up by mainstream rock fans, the counterculture generation saw Reagan and Thatcher come to power, and Greil Marcus, as evidenced by his Europe-focused punk book *Lipstick Traces*, could for a good while no longer write American studies. This 1980s moment can be overlooked but it presented the vernacular in a ‘god that failed’, after the revolution rethinking. The sacred and profane was now a Rock Hall induction, a Led Zep ‘shark incident’ paperback (Davis 1985) or Pamela Des

However, our current, Vernacular: The Next Generation perspective owes to the 1990s, when academics began to achieve field reshaping numbers and most writing on popular music trended toward studies. Dissecting assumptions rather than, as earlier, manifesting or deepening them, the approach showcased early as rock criticism by Frith or folklore by Robert Cantwell became jazz studies via Robert O’Meally’s (1998) Columbia cohort; new musicology taught by Susan McClary with a flashy heavy metal example by her partner, Robert Walser; ethnic studies through George Lipsitz (1990 and 1994), colleague to McClary (1991) and Walser (1993) in the Wesleyan University Press Music/Culture series; pop-conscious ethnomusicology in conversations between Keil and Steven Feld (1994); a Black Atlantic vision inaugurated by Paul Gilroy (1993); hip-hop studies starting with Tricia Rose (1994); a rethinking of blackface by Eric Lott (1993); sound studies in the vein of Jonathan Sterne (2002); Latin American conjunctures mapped by Frances Aparicio (1998) and Lise Waxer (2002a, b); country studies by Richard Peterson (1997) and Diane Pecknold (2007); Broadway musicals by Stacy Wolf (2002). Even cyberpunk science fiction joined the trend: ‘the street finds its own use for things’, William Gibson (1986) wrote, echoing Hebdige and Stuart Hall. To reread the Spin Alternative Record Guide (Weisbard 1995), which started with an Abba entry, is to see in Rob Sheffield and Ann Powers capsules what pretty soon would be called pop-timism; they too had theory training, like such fellow entry writers as wry future novelists Colson Whitehead and James Hannaham, or Alex Ross, New Yorker critic of classical alongside Bjork and Radiohead.

Had sacred and profane vernacular become a text to deconstruct? Not quite, the image of Vaginal Davis on the cover of José Esteban Muñoz’s Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (1999) suggested; performance studies scholars with ‘minoritarian’ allegiances, theory sharp as anybody, aspired to summon, if not an unmediated vernacular, then a no less transgressive cultural imaginary. Meanwhile, Black scholars of Black music like Guthrie Ramsey, Jr, worked to save vernacular expression from popular music studies insta-hybridity: with Race Music (2003), Ramsey made the Aframodernism of a Dinah Washington singing
the salacious ‘Long John Blues’ a North–South, country–city, secular–sacred and class-crossing example of just how far a blues trope might stretch. Put Muñoz and Ramsey together and you’d maybe get Fred Moten, poet-philosopher of ‘the break’ in Black music (2003), who made the ontology of jazz, blues, funk and all the rest a space of analytical boom bap. In his Black and Blur (2018, p. 293), Moten demanded of the Black UK and Birmingham-schooled Gilroy, felt by Moten to be antithetical to US Blackness, ‘Who the fuck you talking to?’

Something was happening here.

Sentimentality’s unfinished business

In the first chapter of In the Break, ‘The Sentimental Avant-Garde’, Moten restored the sentimental as a radical rather than soft category because slavery’s trauma – Saidiya Hartman’s Scenes of Subjection (1997) was central, on Frederick Douglass recalling the screams of his whipped Aunt Hester – paired better with post-soul suffering, rerouting the confident vernacular authenticity claims of countercultural figures like Baraka. Embodiment, staying black and proud, was a rigged John Henry fight. The avant-garde message needed to once again be abolition: of racism, capitalism, macho. How could that be expressed? Moten elaborated in Black and Blur, marking ‘the unfinished business of abolition and reconstruction that is our most enduring legacy of successful, however attenuated struggle’. And note this part: ‘sentimentalism is too often and too easily dismissed by students and devotees of power, especially in its connection to what they dismiss as identity politics’ (Moten 2018, p. 186).

With Moten’s pointers in mind, we can rethink writing from before the recorded vernacular cast its spell – and beyond, into our own post-vernacular era. Slave Songs of the United States (Allen et al., 1867), the spirituals collection published just after the Civil War, came at the instigation of Lucy McKim Garrison, whose abolitionist and feminist parents sent her South to captured territory during the Civil War; there, she published the song ‘Roll, Jordan Roll’ and wrote her best girlfriend a sentimental account. ‘Kneeling in that poor cabin with those who suffered scourgings at our hands … I vowed that if I ever forgot them, so might Heaven forget me!’ (Charters 2015, p. 121). Yet describing black singing for the magazine Dwight’s, McKim became musicological: her sentimentality was adaptable to a professional discursive mode. Sentimentalism could involve political identification with the downtrodden, bourgeois self-reflexivity over managing mood, and an aesthetic commitment to form-advancing uplift. Not to mention strong women, like the first rich female songwriter, Carrie Jacobs-Bond, whose The Roads of Melody (1927) documented her crafted feelings becoming her business. Literary scholar Lauren Berlant’s The Female Complaint (2008) called all this ‘the unfinished business of sentimentality in American culture’, connecting genealogies of the novel and theatre pieces Show Boat and Uncle Tom’s Cabin to challenge Lott’s cultural studies view of minstrelsy. Berlant insisted that sentimentalism’s adaptability made it as forceful as blackface: Show Boat (Ferber 1926) novelist Edna Ferber’s teary Americana united traumas of race, gender, class, and implicitly, Jewish religion. Berlant wrote recognizing that, in the commodified, Céline-Dion-singing-’My Heart Will Go On’-in-Titanic sense explored by Carl Wilson’s work on taste (2014), sentimentality still shaped romantic notions and popular art forms.
For much of the 20th century, the rise of the vernacular meant the purging of the sentimental. In books on American popular music, vernacular ideals rose as sentimental affiliations fell. Hughes and Hurston critiqued Harlem Renaissance respectability politics. Stephen Foster wrote blackface ditties, yet aspired to sentimental weepers and was valued for that in his day: friend Robert Nevin wrote in *The Atlantic* in 1867 that ‘his art taught us all to feel with the colored man the lowly joys and sorrows it celebrated’. Yet Irving Berlin ragged ‘Swanee River’ metaphorically in ‘Alexander’s Ragtime Band’, which Gilbert Seldes praised as ‘utterly unsentimental’ in his 1924 *The Seven Lively Arts*. Lawrence Levine (1977) stressed folk vernacular in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*: African American secular song, he claimed, ‘cut through the sentimentality that marked most popular music’. Gayl Jones wrote: ‘The ballads were in the vernacular but they were oral. The “people” made them, not “writers”’ (Jones and Harper 1977, p. 694).

Yet we now value Berlin’s sentimental later songs, too, like ‘White Christmas’. He wouldn’t have lasted without them. Sentimentality has been a mode of the vernacular all along. David Ritz, turning from academia to ghost writing, worked this relationship in his flowery as-told-to books (Ritz 2012), revering the better-than-true *Lady Sings the Blues* (Holiday 2006) as his model. So too did young rock critic Cameron Crowe, celebrating the taste of older sisters as his *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1981) moved from book to film. Wayne Koestenbaum (1993, p. 235) used opera queens to revamp vernacular and sentimental altogether under the rubric of catharsis: ‘the wish, condemned as effeminate, never to reassemble the socialized self, but, instead, to remain in tears forever, to stay where Puccini’s *La Boheme* (1896) places us’. Tia DeNora analysed *Music in Everyday Life* (2000) as professional women using sentiment as a tool. Jonathan Lethem (2011, p. 121) urged that his fannish fiction and non-fiction be read for ‘impulses to beguile, cajole, evoke sensation, and even to manipulate’. Ellen Willis (1981, 2011), among her critic peers, brought feminist critique to question rock as a grass-roots art form. The Birmingham Centre cultural studies writers considered belief in a counterhegemonic vernacular simplistic at a time of what Stuart Hall (1979) called ‘the great moving Right show’. Frith (2007, p. 176), joining Willis and Birmingham, was pointed: ‘It makes better sense to define pop as the sentimental song’. And rock, kick though it might, would pop.

Ideas of sentimental and vernacular have pulled at each other over time, vernacular impulses purging the sentimental, then cultural studies impulses purging the vernacular. If the vernacular ultimately debated Blackness, the sentimental turned on gender and sexuality. Seldes (1924) and Chase (1987) scorned what Seldes called ‘the exact equivalent of a high-toned lady’, Chase ‘the emulation of the elegant’. What Karl Hagstrom Miller (2010) termed the ‘folkloric paradigm’ validated anti-genteel vernacular: ideas of a jazz, rock or hip-hop centred genre language of vernacular overcoming conservative constraints. Tin Pan Alley, too, modernized via a slangy, theatrical, minstrel mock vernacular. It wasn’t proper, but it sold. Sentimentality became the doggie in the window: sweet sounds the most compromised. Yet liberatory presentations faltered once the revolution was over. Feminists like Willis, Phyl Garland (1969), Angela McRobbie (1980, 2000) and Susan Douglas (1994) dissected rebellious masculine street identities and celebrated bedroom fans. Eric Lott’s revisioning of blackface abandoned the question of minstrelsy’s truth as vernacular to present it as a contested terrain of sexualized cross-racial identification – the love that went with the theft. Cultural nationalist and not
incidentally strong feminist Greg Tate (2016, p. 249) complained: ‘Oh, the selling power of the Black Vernacular’. The dark princes discovered in Miles Davis’s autobiography (1989) and Kitty Kelley’s trashing of Frank Sinatra, His Way (1986), turned out to be no less compelling when their constraints were highlighted instead of downplayed.

Noticing how sentimental and vernacular rhetoric thread through otherwise distinct music books can help us read and listen better. If a Céline Dion song is sentimental, and a Louis Armstrong scat is vernacular, Armstrong singing ‘What a Wonderful World’ is a delicious hot toddy of a reminder not to assume purity in either category. The vernacular was long presumed to fight, thrill and endure over time, recognized as art, while the sentimental faded, exposed as a kitschy fraud of well-meaning sanctimony. Figures like Armstrong or Elvis Presley were thought by the Gunther Schullers (1968) and Peter Guralnicks (1994) to battle dual impulses, rebellious and conformist, the split positioned as vernacular America against sentimental Europe, vernacular working class against sentimental middle class, vernacular black – or black acting – against sentimental white and vernacular male against sentimental female. However, Guralnick was only able to cement his Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley biography when he abandoned his rock critic conviction that the best Elvis was the blues Elvis, learning to revere the balladeer and the southern women whose sentimental depictions of Presley had the power to reshape scholarship. Generations of Armstrong analysts battled to work through how to reckon with both, to use critic Gary Giddins’s formulation (1988), The Genius as Entertainer and The Entertainer as Genius. Richard Peterson (1997), a sociologist of culture who lived from a bebop adolescence to alt-country explorations as a septuagenarian, had the perfect catchphrase: ‘the dialectic of hard-core and soft-shell’. Jessica Hagedorn (1993, pp. 188–94) – poet, novelist, musician, playwright, immigrant – offered another strong formulation: ‘pulp songs stupefy some, awaken others./Revolution’s sentimental, after all’.

Literatures of popular music

Marlon James’s (2014, p. 512) novel A Brief History of Seven Killings fictionalized an assassination attempt on Bob Marley, staging at one point a confrontation between Jamaican gangsters and a white Rolling Stone critic writing about their culture. They forced him to read his words aloud as they tortured him: ‘Man, people like me just excite you, eh? Put a white journalist beside him own “Stagger Lee” and your brain go bananas’. A door shut. But another opened. Zadie Smith’s (2016) Swing Time, focused on the nexus of dance and pop from the Astaire movie used as the title to a Madonna stand-in character, had enviable criticism: ‘for Astaire the person in the film was not especially connected with him’ (p. 121). Bête noire Tracey’s ‘world seemed childish to me, just a way of playing with the body, whereas I could walk down the hall and attend a lecture called something like “Thinking the Black Body: A Dialectic”’ (p. 286). Former Village Voice television critic Colson Whitehead’s John Henry Days (2001) traced the condescending early 20th century scholarship of Guy Johnson and Howard Odum in a panoramic view of lore that placed the historical Henry alongside Tin Pan Alley song pluggers, downhome recorders, Paul Robeson and a couplet that went ‘Roland Barthes got hit by a truck/That’s a signifier you can’t duck’. While Jonathan Franzen (2010, p. 200) laughed about ‘that era when we pretended rock was the scourge of conformity and consumerism,
instead of its anointed handmaid’, endorsing the Mekons, novelists as different as Pulitzer winner Jennifer Egan (2010, p. 349) and mystery writer Sharyn McCrumb (1998, p. 160) evoked treacherous tropes that had lasted generations: ‘it was another girl, young and new to the city, fiddling with her keys’; ‘There’s always a new dead girl to sing about. Always a dead girl’. Popular music had never seemed so essential to American fiction.

Then again, popular musicians had never seemed so literary. Bob Dylan’s Nobel Prize aside, it was striking that in his memoir, Chronicles (2004), the chapter that came closest to exploring his heralded electric rocker period started with an awkward encounter with Archibald McLeish, a Popular Front type glad to hear mentions of Pound and Eliot in Dylan songs and eager to collaborate; Dylan wondered if McLeish knew Robert Johnson and anticipated failure. However, he also, in that same chapter, heard Frank Sinatra, Jr, performing in the Rainbow Room. Dylan, time would show, felt as warm to standards as he was cold to being cast as ‘the Big Bubba of Rebellion, High Priest of Protest, the Czar of Dissent, the Duke of Disobedience, Leader of the Freeloaders, Kaiser of Apostasy, Archbishop of Anarchy, the Big Cheese’ (Dylan 2004, p. 120). It’s an easy connection to compare Chronicles with the Patti Smith of Just Kids (2010), a National Book Award winner in non-fiction for its account of the Dylan peer’s relationships with photographer Robert Mapplethorpe and figures like collector Harry Smith – the bohemian mix was everything: ‘I tacked pictures of Rimbaud, Bob Dylan, Lotte Lenya, Piaf, Genet, and John Lennon, over a makeshift desk’ (p. 45).

Yet a sense of the literary was no less vivid in Jay-Z’s Decoded (2010), which lingered, like Dylan, on seemingly minor encounters and anti-vernacular showmanship. An argument with Village Voice writer Elizabeth Mendez Berry, questioning the rapper’s Che Guevara t-shirt, was the friction needed to write ‘Public Service Announcement’ and end the book’s first chapter. The former Def Jam CEO related to managerial uses of music: ‘guys in corporate offices who psych themselves up listening to my music, which sounds odd at first, but makes sense’ (p. 295). He didn’t discount authenticity, but the bigger triumph was reconciling sentimentality and vernacular, like Scarface getting terrible news at the studio and compressing it into his guest verse on the spot. Blues truth? Tin Pan Alley schlock? He told another story about the hard-knock lies he’d concocted to clear an Annie interpolation: a sweet, utterly untrue tale of winning an essay contest and getting to see the show. And returned to his central theme. ‘Rap is built to handle contradictions’. Ahmir ‘Questlove’ Thompson’s Mo’ Meta Blues (2013), arching an eyebrow at the quintessential genre of vernacular recordings, was a life told through his relationship to spinning LPs. Poet and mover-shaker Kevin Young, a New Yorker poetry editor and Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture director en route to running the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, published The Grey Album (2012). Named after a full-length DJ Danger Mouse mash-up of Jay-Z’s Black Album, lyrically, and the Beatles’ so-called White Album, musically, it meditated on how vernacular Blackness had become literary Blackness, engaging the dialect-vernacular blend in Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s poetry of masks and caged bird song, the ‘Crazy’ blues of Mamie Smith long before Danger Mouse and Cee-lo hit with the same concept as Gnarls Barkley.

Scholarship moved to address the intersection of popular music as literary expression. Brent Edwards made the connection essential to jazz: the scatology of Armstrong’s scat, to consider why that free flow was part of a syntax, a way of
dropping words that also dropped sounds – he had to photograph the great man’s own documents when transcription wouldn’t do; an argument that ‘the literary is less an analogy for Ellington’s music than an inherent element in his conception of music itself and a key formal bridge or instigating spur in his compositional process’ (Edwards 2004, p. 331, 2017). Increasingly, in books as different as Edward Comentale’s Sweet Air (2013), the second volume of Thomas Brothers’s Armstrong biography (2014) and Elijah Wald’s Escaping the Delta (2004), musicians once seen as primitive masters, savants, were recast as vernacular modernists – their recordings non-representative art, attempts to wrestle a meaning out of broader shifts. For Paige McGinley, it was pivotal to see characters inside and outside of the music as Staging the Blues (2014), not Stomping them (as Albert Murray put it [1976]), or being essentialized to a place and time (e.g. Delta blues); for Kimberly Mack, Fictional Blues (2020) characterized Robert Johnson as much as Jack White, each narrating rather than personifying the blues. Daphne Brooks, in her new, hugely ambitious Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound (2021), connects, in a feat of imaginary conjuration that she attributes to Muñoz, the criticism of an Ellen Willis and the Afromodern culture writing of Willis’s hero, playwright Lorraine Hansberry; then ends by exploring what it means for the contemporary jazz singer, and MacArthur Fellow, Cécile McLorin Salvant, to cover – as theatre, not realism – ‘The Murder Ballad’, a 30 minute number that Jelly Roll Morton set down during his multi-hour 1938 recording session with Alan Lomax at the Library of Congress (Lomax 2002).

Jelly Roll Morton? Perhaps the literary ‘tinge’ had been there all along, like the Latin one Morton famously placed inside jazz. Jazz critic Martin Williams, in liner notes to the first LP issue of the Morton tapes, criticized the distorted, self-centred narrative Morton gave of musical migrations. Later, rock critic Nik Cohn (2005) said he’d been transformed by the image of a mixed-race prostitute illustrating a page of the book that Lomax made out of the session: the Morton in Mister Jelly Roll who heralded that mighty wind Cohn’s founding pop-rock fantasy history called Awopbopaloobop (1996). Revisionist folklorists situated Lomax against his dad John (a racist but charismatic blues stager in McGinley’s account), but also against Hurston, with whom he’d also tried to research, to mixed results. Morton’s creole origins, his nonchalance recounting whorehouses, race riots and social rhythms from classical gatherings to gay balls, made him endlessly adaptable, although Lomax protested the tap musical Jelly’s Last Jam and as late as the 1990s, Rounder Records was asked to delete the dirtiest bordello material, to prevent political outrage. The permanent wink in Morton’s voice could never be fully captured in words. However, his book-sized contribution remained a challenge for all synthesizers of American popular music. Could our conceptions of its multilayered meanings ever encompass his cosmopolitan ramble?

**Literary sentimental vernaculars and US popular music writing**

It’s early 2021 and we’re watching Regina King and Kemp Powers’s adaptation of the Powers play, One Night in Miami, not long after viewing a George C. Wolfe and Ruben Santiago-Hudson adaptation of August Wilson’s Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom (1985). The artistic wing of Black Lives Matter has been soul sustaining during our lockdown – in contrast to vernacular populism’s latest chapter in the great moving right show: outright white supremacist fascism. These filmed plays aren’t
revolutionary and epic in the manner of Louis Armstrong’s opening to ‘West End Blues’, James Brown’s groove-chorus ignition ‘Say It Loud – I’m Black and I’m Proud’, Spike Lee’s video for Public Enemy’s ‘Fight the Power’, Beyoncé’s Homecoming or even the Marvel film Black Panther. One Night imagines a meeting, right after Cassius Clay becomes champ, between the fighter, his mentor Malcolm X and his friends Sam Cooke and running back James Brown, in the ‘Change is Gonna Come’ moment between Afromodernism and Black Power. Ma Rainey turns on a studio session featuring the mother of the blues, considering what it cost to lock her voice and her band inside a Paramount Records product.

Attacked by some for their sins against biographical accuracy, the theatre pieces turn on stutters and pauses in history’s unfolding, stray meetings. The viewpoint is literary, teary, multivalent and pessimistic. The creators don’t, I’d argue, abandon the Black vernacular to cultural studies hybridity. They find new ways to marshal its force, queer and exegete its impact. Add to the category the dance scenes in Steve McQueen’s Lovers Rock, a home-party dancehall sublime kept from state and marketplace, counterpart to the brutally regulated dancing in McQueen’s film of the 1853 novel that fed sentiment into Black music studies from the start, Solomon Northup’s Twelve Years a Slave. Or Arthur Jafa’s short film Love is the Message, The Message is Death, made public during the quarantine as a balm – a few edited minutes of a montage set to a Kanye West track: athletes dunking, gospel singers exhorting, regular people dancing, but also police sticks pounding, Hurricane Katrina engulfing, the whole mess running in a loop. The Mississippi-raised Jafa, it turned out, had been part of the discourse for quite some time: Greg Tate’s banter buddy through decades of post-soul unfolding; the source of Tricia Rose’s conceptualization in Black Noise of hip-hop as flow, layering and rupture; cinematographer for his then partner Julie Dash’s abstract Gullah film Daughters of the Dust.

When Greil Marcus deluged readers with references and linkages, as I have been doing, he called it – borrowing the concept from fellow category-breaker Nick Tosches – ‘secret history’. On the page, this summoned spirits, especially pre-Internet: Marcus’s collector networks let him access songs and narratives otherwise all but lost and his criticism made the margins speak to the mainstream. Mystery Train came out in 1975, when Elvis was still alive, the conclusion an incandescent ‘Presliad’. Breaking southern white working-class barriers that Hank Williams couldn’t, his films inadvertent French surrealism, this King throwing it all away was an American studies symbol of contradictions to rival Melville’s white whale. Marcus footnoted a dream he’d had about a Vegas ad appearing on the singer’s penis. And nobody subsequently slammed Albert Goldman harder than Marcus, outraged at a basic bigotry that extended to the pathographer mocking Presley’s ‘ugly hillbilly pecker’.

Dick swinging contests proved less attractive to academics, however, than a barely published book from the next year, the Birmingham Centre’s subcultures study, Resistance Through Rituals, whose influence swelled over time, like a Velvet Underground album rising from the cut-out racks. The apparatus of culturalist Marxism was navigable: Gramsci citations easier to track down than Harmonica Frank and Kleenex records. Next-generation vernacular studies, of the sort documented fully in the second edition Amerigrove, looked for recuperable instabilities in genres and discourses about them, often too-fierce assertions (sexist, racist, classist or just dunderheaded) of the vernacular’s revolutionary appeal; put forward a modicum of archival research as new evidence; then wrapped themselves protectively in kindred citations, a reflex that soon swelled into companion books of the Handbook of
and Guide to varieties. Secret history lost out to cultural studies mapping – in popular music, standard IASPM fare.

This disposition to prefer a sober literature of the stuffed bookshelf variety over the firestarters, more presumed than examined, comes under challenge with the newer US writing I’m pointing to, if with a twist: now the renegades write as Black authors, women, LGBTQ figures, immigrants, working class. Daphne Brooks (2021, p. 39) asks:

What would it mean to put it all together and to put it in the service of the sisters? What if we could get everybody in the same room and around the same table to do some hardcore Black thinking, some mindful meditation on the capaciousness of Blackness, some deep listening to the sounds and performances that evade easy logic, and what if, still more, we could mix it up in the mosh pit with rock and roll criticism in order to tell a different story about popular music culture, one that takes seriously the women who made new sounds and, likewise, thought hard about how to go about writing down and recuperating the value of said sounds for the ages?

Drawing on Moten, she locates secret history. ‘In the world of Black studies, the “right to obscurity,” as Fred Moten famously argues, “corresponds to the need for the fugitive, the immigrant and the new (and newly constrained) citizen to hold something in reserve, to keep a secret”’ (p. 39). She cites Marcus (1997) on Dylan’s basement tapes, demanding – like a child of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man (1952), grappling us from the lower frequencies – a basement of her own.

And she casts her project as Liner Notes: a form that explicates, but with the intent to heighten appreciation of a work, not complicate its premises. It’s a form she has participated in for artists as prominent as Aretha Franklin and Prince. Here is Brooks on that live ‘Murder Ballad’:

We who are there in that glass temple of jazz hovering over Central Park watch and listen carefully to Salvant, the storyteller, to ourselves, and to the room – reacting in phases to the shock value of Morton’s quixotic blue tale. We listen to the reverberations in the room as the f-bomb, the b-bomb, and the n-bomb fly fast and furious, as detailed descriptions of maiming and throat cutting and crotch shooting, of lesbian sex, and of potently forthright sex talk, sexual desire, and questions posed from one woman to another on how best to pleasure each other linger in the air as Salvant and band soldier on through the strophic insistence of the song in something akin to a ‘bardic trance’ jam. (p. 414)

The prose evokes rock criticism, Village Voice style, Pop Conference style as that gathering’s mix of academic and non-academic voices has solidified in yearly meetings since 2002, Brooks there every time. Yet it still represents an outlier to the IASPM or Popular Music norm of popular music studies style.

The trends I’m documenting in 2021 are not, I hope I have shown, wholly new. We do better to see American popular music writing – I’ll leave aside the question of how to compare it to other writing legacies elsewhere – as contested, provisional, capsules of insight, the creative progeny of unlikely bedfellows. Unruly, to use the word Robert Palmer attached to the history he fashioned as a book companion to his role as chief consultant for the 1995 PBS television series Rock & Roll. Palmer grew up in Arkansas, played in bands, organized blues festivals, then went to New York, where he became chief pop-music critic of the Times and wrote for Rolling Stone and Penthouse yet also the Journal of American Folklore and Ethnomusicology. Blues & Chaos (2009), compiled by Anthony DeCurtis a decade after Palmer died needing a liver and lacking health insurance, put his drug addiction on record: ‘I’m from the William Burroughs school of junkies’, he told rocker Robbie Robertson. Nobody explored the depth of vernacular music, Muddy Waters microtones to Black Sabbath thud, Jajoukan mysticism and art drone, with the ease of Palmer, whose exposition made peers of general interest readers, scholars and musicians. Yet this tour guide was a rock and roller from the Lou Reed school of Dionysians.

When Palmer wrote about James Brown for Rolling Stone in the early 1970s (see The James Brown Reader [George and Leeds 2008] and Rolling Stone Illustrated History [Miller 1980]), then again for Rock & Roll: An Unruly History, he vaulted over other rock critics for his southern sensibility, valuing of rhythm over song, and ability to write about musicianship accessibly. In 1975, in Down Beat, Palmer lectured: ‘we need a set of procedures which will allow us to evaluate Charles Ives and James Brown’ (Palmer 2009, p. 4). He created them. Palmer centred a ‘preference for impure sounds’, the use of electricity to amplify rawness and physicality, a crossroads meeting of trickster mojo, personalized lore, and ‘wide open’ sin towns. He asked at the end of Deep Blues (1981): ‘How much history can be transmitted by pressure on a guitar string?’

Marybeth Hamilton (2008), in her revisionist account of blues mythologizers, wondered at Palmer’s role in this; at one point he asserted functional illiteracy as vital to Waters, Bobby Bland or Joe Turner’s singing, too captured by an ‘I’m Gonna Murder My Baby’ ethos pushing white rock from black blues. John Lennon called Palmer on his shit, singing ‘Pardon me if I’m sentimental’ at the Dakota after the critic called ‘Starting Over’ sappy in the paper of record (Palmer 2009). Ruminating English critic David Toop (1995) challenged Palmer for calling Ornette Coleman’s first free jazz recordings meandering and lacking a bluesy ‘basis in vernacular rhythms’. Toop shot back: ‘passion existed before blues and besides, music not going anywhere is one of the most fertile developments of the twentieth century’ (p. 193). This was not just a squabble between two enormous La Monte Young fans. Where Palmer, fan of unruly rock ‘n’ roll anchored in African American electric eruptions, hailed vernacular, Toop’s ambience revived Euro-Asian sentimental.

Is there room for this kind of conversation and the others I have been tracing to enter the front rooms of popular music writing, the classrooms, as much as the basements and secret histories? We have been given, this past decade and a half, a paradigm shift: YouTube, Spotify. Journal articles used to be easier to access than Elvis on Milton Berle; that’s no longer true. The quintessential music text of pop, the record, has been challenged by another, the filmed performance. So much to pass around – who needs to rely on a cultural studies footnote? We are all Jelly Roll Mortons now, Alabama bound, songs infiltrating our books in progress. Our popular music studies are being asked to become popular music performances, joining all of the
vernacular-sentimental-literary rest of them. It doesn’t seem quite proper, maybe, but when was American music writing ever anything like tightly composed?

Let me end where I began, with music and poker games. One link might be to a poker routine clip by Black blackface comedian-singer Bert Williams a century ago: silent pantomime because Williams’s voice was never recorded at the same time as his body, any more than his face was his face – he said his songs were not so much written as assembled and acts of assemblage secured his legacy. ‘The smile that hovered above blood and tragedy’, W.E.B. Du Bois offered a tribute book (Rowland 1923); Jessie Fauset’s brilliant New Negro chapter (Fauset 1925), ‘The Gift of Laughter’, resembled Ellen Willis later on Bob Dylan as the cartography of an icon’s mask. In 1970, Ann Charters, a Beats scholar (her husband Sam wrote studies of Country Blues early and a biography of Lucy McKim Garrison late; their collaborative marriage is an untold history), published Nobody, the ‘story of a man neatly trapped by the prejudice and intolerance of his time’. Yet Gilroy’s diasporic Black Atlantic taught scholars to appreciate a problematized conjuncture. Louis Chude-Sokei’s insightful The Last ‘Darky’ (2006) began with Lorca and Soyinka on masks and called Williams’s legacy ‘as troubling then as it is productive now’. For others, that sense came from the audio discs that Williams set down starting in 1901, collected a century later by Archeophone with extensive liner notes. Tim Brooks’s Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry (2004) lingered over each release, finding triumph rather than compromise.

Duke Ellington held onto his cards longer than Williams’s Jonah Man character ever could, leading jazz for decades but imagining an art ‘beyond category’ – and not just musical category. In the memoir Music is my Mistress (1973), compiled by Stanley Dance from hotel pads that Ellington filled in spare moments, Sir Duke allowed his poetry (‘Music’ as a ‘topless chick’ you ‘like to see shake it’ but ‘never quite make it’ [pp. 39–40]) and prose poems on subjects as critical as ‘Categories to paint and splatter what jazz conservators had rendered ‘quite scholastic’. Ellington mocked ‘the music people insisted on calling jazz’, more interested in the hybridities of his satiric musical Jump for Joy or the Shakespeare inspired Such Sweet Thunder. ‘The whole world is going oriental’, he predicted, ‘and nobody will be able to retain his identity’ (p. 203). R.D. Darrell invented Ellington criticism in Phonograph Monthly Review and the 1932 essay ‘Black Beauty’: ‘Ellington has emancipated American popular music from text’ (Tucker 1993). Ellington sought greater emancipation: ‘I am trying to play the natural feelings of a people’ and ‘what is being done by Countee Cullen and others in literature is overdue in our music’ (Tucker 1993, p. 46). And as jazz-as-pop critic Gary Giddins remembered, using the anecdote to kick off the multi-part Ellington monograph he smuggled into Visions of Jazz (1998, pp. 102–4), the bandleader left behind a signal piece of wisdom: ‘You can’t write music right unless you know how the man who’ll play it plays poker’.

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