



Western Connecticut State University
WestCollections: digitalcommons@wcsu

Faculty Papers

History and Non-Western Cultures


4-2005

Mavericks and Other Traditions in American Music

Burton Peretti Dr.

Western Connecticut State University, PerettiB@wcsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.wcsu.edu/historypaper>

 Part of the [Other History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Peretti, Burton Dr., "Mavericks and Other Traditions in American Music" (2005). *Faculty Papers*. 6.
<https://repository.wcsu.edu/historypaper/6>

race, difference, and power at various historical junctures. European and Euro-American reception of African and African-American-generated sound, music, and rhythm constructed black music variously as confirmation of African difference, "African diasporic humanity," racial and sexual threats to European civilization, and later, evidence of spiritual transcendence and cultural wholeness.

Building on historical findings about the everyday forms of interracial contact in the antebellum South, Radano explores how slave songs, works by African-American musicians at country dances, and sacred songs performed in the context of Christian revival meetings infused black music with complex, even contradictory information about racial difference. Such interracial musical encounters and conclusions about African-American musical talent and humanity vied with powerful competing socio-musical claims, namely the "modern European musical conceptions of others" in which black sound and music necessarily occupied a subordinate position.

This book offers stimulating readings of texts on music and race that supplement the extraordinarily rich body of work on African-American social and cultural history and the forms and localities of racial formation in the United States. Beyond its interdisciplinary scope and critical energy, its most valuable contribution for historians most likely lies in its carefully theorized, compellingly argued, and richly documented analysis of music as a site of social and cultural contestation. As historians increasingly seek to incorporate music into their work, Radano's clear, incisive modeling of "music" as a performative, textual, and social phenomenon that must be interrogated historically rather than essentialized is particularly welcome.

As accomplished a work as this is, however, a curious silence haunts it. Although Radano takes pains to recover evidence that can clarify how the study of black music offers fresh vistas on the racialized "partiality of American society," he gives only cursory attention to the implications of the repeated conflation of black music and male bodies in his sources. The lack of critical discussion of where African and Euro-American female music makers or audiences fit in the history of black music limits the depth of understanding that this book can provide concerning black music's interrelationship with the history of gender, sexuality, and women's place. Why should European, Euro-American, and African-American evaluators find black music synonymous with male bodies, voices, texts? How might the erasure of African, African-American, or Euro-American female contributions to the production or consumption of black music from the historical record further the social and cultural work that elite interpretation of black music performed (e.g. measuring humanity, registering difference, discovering "hot" rhythm)? Such an omission is perplexing given the extensive work on such questions in cultural history and cultural studies of music. Further research into these dimensions of the discursive properties of black

music across time and space is still needed to sharpen our understanding of music making, race, and individual and national identity formation.

DEREK W. VAILLANT
University of Michigan

MICHAEL BROYLES. *Mavericks and Other Traditions in American Music*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 2004. Pp. 387. \$40.00.

Michael Broyles's ambitious and stimulating study traces the history of American musical mavericks: creative visionaries who, by choice or circumstance, largely resided outside of the musical and cultural mainstream. The eighteenth-century hymn composer William Billings and the antebellum symphonist Anthony Philip Heinrich, Broyles shows, were mavericks largely by circumstance, isolated by the lack of viable musical networks in the early United States. After the mid-nineteenth century, commercial song publishing, the musical stage, and above all German-trained classical composers created such networks, and now mavericks were those who defined themselves in opposition to this status quo. The young Leo Ornstein's pianistic modernism guaranteed him only a brief vogue in the 1910s, while for decades Charles Ives pursued a career in insurance, scorned musical professionals, and composed dissonant works in isolation. In 1922 modernist composers began to organize their own societies, publications, and concerts. Carl Ruggles, Charles Seeger, and Henry Cowell paved the way for striking iconoclasts such as John Cage and Harry Partch. Shifting post-World War II orthodoxies in art music—involving twelve-tone serialism, free atonality, and minimalism—then led new nonconformists, such as Frank Zappa and Meredith Monk, to carve out startling compositional and performative identities.

Broyles's work partially retraces familiar territory. Magisterial music histories by H. Wiley Hitchcock, Gilbert Chase, Charles Hamm, and others all discuss these composers (at least through Partch) and trace a tradition of rugged individualism. Broyles's initial chapters on Billings and Heinrich, while engaging and substantive, add little to what we already know and mostly provide an extended prologue to the rest of the book. Alleged maverick traditions since the Civil War, however, receive nuanced and innovative treatments, and Broyles's sensitivity to the sociological complexities of the maverick phenomenon becomes evident. He asks early in his study, "to what extent are the mavericks a historical, cultural, or mythic creation of publicity, their own or others" and "to what extent are they the result of a filtering process that occurs somewhere in our collective consciousness, by which we glorify, transform, and in some cases re-create our artists to fit our perceptions or our fantasies?" (p. 2). Americans' own construction of the maverick tradition proves critical. Broyles brilliantly shows how, after World War II, Cage exploited sophisticated audiences' yearning for a particular brand of folksy, irascible, orientalist

iconoclasm, while serialists such as Milton Babbitt gained academic cachet by tapping into an acute faith in scientific progress. Similarly, in the twentieth century Billings and Heinrich were rescued from oblivion by musicologists seeking the origins of American musical maverickdom. Broyles concludes the Americans' persistent construction of a musical maverick tradition reflected their adherence to myths of individualism, which successfully diverted them from deeper (and more problematic) traditions of community identity.

The analytical final section of Broyles's book, "The Legacy of the Mavericks," circles back to his main subjects and explores the intellectual and cultural trends that defined them as mavericks. Broyles identifies signs of decay in the tradition and its construction beginning in the 1960s, as his inspired inclusion of Zappa especially shows. An autodidact who only slowly mastered rock guitar playing (ostensibly his primary musical skill) and who was sketchily instructed in composition, Zappa used vulgar theatrics aimed at teen audiences to grope toward a tightly controlled performance art that increasingly succeeded at reinvigorating the fundamental vitality of the musical stage experience. Alternatively Monk, like Cage and Partch, has battled Western music's emphases on rationality and science but gone beyond them by rejecting all instruments but the human voice. Monk encourages Broyles to end his study with an optimistic paean to contemporary redefinitions (or deconstructions) of the idea of music itself—a celebration that seems to rekindle the idea that an actual, valid maverick tradition is still at work.

The curiously miscellaneous reference in Broyles's title to "other traditions" suggests that his tracing of maverickdom—as a tradition and as a cultural construction—should be construed only as a tentative initial investigation, designed to encourage more sweeping future reinterpretations of American music history. Scholars likely will want to go beyond his exclusive focus on European-American composers in a nation rich with African-American, Latino, Asian American, and Native American musicians (many of whom were also definitely mavericks). America's musical cultures also long made female creators *de facto* mavericks, composing in rooms of their own; Broyles only briefly touches on their experiences. The subtleties of identity politics in the United States militate against broad assertions about maverickdom. For example, while Broyles rightly considers Aaron Copland a mainstream composer and makes him a minor figure in his book, in certain contexts his Jewishness, his homosexuality, and his populism made him a maverick, if only temporarily. While we await further investigations, though, we can enjoy and profit from Broyles's scrupulous and elegantly written reinterpretation of a major current in the history of American music.

BURTON W. PERETTI

Western Connecticut State University

ARNALDO TESTI. *Stelle e strisce: Storia di Una Bandiera*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri. 2003. Pp. 140. €9.50.

A common experience for European visitors in the United States—one that Arnaldo Testi aptly recalls in his remarkable book—is that of marveling at the insistence with which the American flag is displayed almost everywhere and on every occasion. The reaction is usually a mixed one, of surprise, perplexity, even embarrassment, and sometimes annoyance, national flags being to Europeans, independently of one's own political stance, clear symbols of patriotism if not outright chauvinism. But, as often happens in this field, things are rather more complicated, especially as far as the relationship between American culture and the "Stars and Stripes" is concerned. And this book, written by an outstanding Italian scholar well-known both in Europe and in the United States, is a very useful tool for anyone who is interested in knowing more about that relationship. Of course, one may wonder (and I myself feel inclined to do so) if this is not yet another form of "American exceptionalism": every aspect of the American national life becoming a sort of peculiar experience, to be separately and differently approached, encapsulated, studied, and explained. It may or may not be so. But one thing is certain: the metaphorical density of so many phenomena that involve American culture (and above all American material culture) and the way in which they become (and define themselves as) impressive symbols, within and without the United States, are matters of study as well as of wonder.

The end result of a post-September 11 university course in Italy (and the expanded version of a previous article), this book explores the many ways in which that relationship has manifested itself since the Revolutionary War—and the many faces that the national symbol took on during more than two and a half centuries. At the very beginning of his book, Testi writes that "the American flag born during the American revolution accompanied the manifold developments which followed it, and was itself a cultural terrain of dispute and confrontation. Whatever it represents, the 'Stars and Stripes' is a bloodthirsty totem" (p. 13).

One is then led through the various stages both of the process through which a definite (tangible) "form" of flag was designed and finally accepted (a dialectical process too often neglected, and which contains many interesting implications) and of the varying meanings (positive/negative) that the "flag as metaphor" has assumed ever since in different historical, social, and cultural situations and contexts (the postrevolutionary period, the Civil War, the turn-of-the-century years, World War I and its aftermath, World War II and the following decades, until our own times). In the 140 pages of this small-format book, the history of the flag as object and metaphor is followed in all its relationships to politics, everyday life, culture, and literature.

Testi's book has many strong points and a minor

Copyright of American Historical Review is the property of American Historical Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.