

第5回大会シンポジウム特集「私にとってのアメリカ音楽」

American Music, Black and White

(私にとってのアメリカ音楽：白人と黒人の音楽)

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Given America's obsession with race, it is not surprising that it has become common over the past two centuries to designate certain songs as "white music" or "black music". In the past century, this has been complicated by recording companies, music stores and radio broadcasters who put arbitrary genre labels on songs, singers, and musicians in order to sell them to the public. A song that may sound like blues to one person may sound like a religious folk song to another. Because of this, it is important at the outset to recognize that whether a song is labeled as black, white, secular or sacred is frequently arbitrary.

Two representative American songs illustrate this: "John Henry" and "Amazing Grace". In addition to anecdotal evidence, there is now enough dependable research on the traditions of these songs to show how risky it is to treat song lyrics as sources for understanding culture. This is not to suggest that one cannot or should not use music as a way of understanding the culture of a people at some time in history. To the contrary, music may be an essential source of knowledge where there is no traditional documentary evidence available, or where such documentation is highly biased. For example, we can learn a lot about the Atlantic slave trade from the records of ship captains who recorded in careful detail where their "cargo" came from, how old the "cargo" was, and how much the "cargo" cost. What we do not have, obviously, is a similar written record of the experience of those Africans who were abducted, sold to the ship captains, and—for those who survived the Atlantic crossing—sold again to work on plantations in the New World.

Returning to the first of the songs taken up here, research shows that "John Henry" was one of the early songs called "the blues" and also one of the first recorded "country" songs—two different genres. It may have been the most recorded folk song in the U.S.

Unlike other railway songs it is long, tells a story and has dozens of versions. Some 50 versions of the song are categorized as work songs or ballads, sometimes accompanied by a fiddle, banjo or guitar. Scott Nelson of William and Mary made a serious attempt to find out exactly who John Henry was and has concluded that he was probably a black man arrested and convicted for some minor crime in 1865, and temporarily held before becoming a leased convict who worked on the construction of the railway at the Big Bend Tunnel near Talcott, West Virginia, west of Virginia border. He achieved a posthumous reputation for being supernaturally strong and unafraid of the extremely dangerous conditions involved in blasting through the mountains to lay railroad track. He probably died in 1873.

The song “John Henry” was transmitted orally from the early 1870s to 1909—without written lyrics—along the route of the railway system. The song was passed along by track-liners, coal miners, prisoners and eventually folklorists. Together they turned a cautionary tale about the dangers of construction into a legend.

Here is where things become complicated. Is this a song about black laborers suffering under white suppression leading up to Jim Crow? Is it a song about the loneliness of the workers in isolated mountains facing the possibility of death on a daily basis—regardless of skin color? Is it a song about the mechanization of labor—John Henry competing against a steam drill—and loss of pride in physical accomplishment? Or is it a song about a superhero that everyone admires.

Blacks and whites learned the song, and as they passed the song down, they developed completely different interpretations of who John Henry was and what the song is about. Many thought John Henry was white.

Known around the world, “Amazing Grace” is a similar case of complicated transformation. To the majority of people who know the song, it is a black spiritual that became a part of the gospel repertoire.

Perhaps no contemporary rendition of the song is as dynamic as Aretha Franklin’s live recording in 1972 in a church setting. The person introducing the song ties it clearly to the Civil Rights Movement and how the grace of God had brought about so many changes in the years from the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* through the 1960s to the time of the performance.

This would lead most listeners to assume that the song was a traditional black spiritual that evolved during the period of slavery and taken a new meaning as a protest song for Civil Rights. These listeners would be greatly surprised to learn that the lyrics were actually composed by John Newton (1725-1807). Not only was

Newton a white man, he also captained a ship transporting slaves from Africa to North America. In short, he directly contributed to and benefited from the Atlantic slave trade.

What about the lyrics of the song? They had nothing to do with repentance for what he did to African slaves who he bought and sold. The lyrics tell only of his personal, individual joy at realizing that he had been saved by the grace of God. Only much later in his life did he begin to take an abolitionist stance.

Yet when Aretha Franklin and other black singers perform the song, it is transformed into something completely different from what Newton himself intended. Lyrics and the music that accompany them deserve serious attention, especially when we do not have the typical written record of documents, letters, essays, and laws that we are usually dependent on. If we use them cautiously, we may discover something of great value. Just as important, however, we may also discover that music can be interpreted in entirely contradictory ways. This speaks to the power of music to mean different things to different people at different times. While some call a particular song black music or white music, the truth is that it is music for people, whatever their culture.