

Turn Your Radio On: Music In the Novels of Silas House

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Music is an integral part of life. It is a natural extension of an oral tradition found in many cultures and is a universal art form that transcends time, age, race, and nationality. For hundreds of years, and across continents, music has also served an important role in literature. In his book, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, Bernard Bell discusses an oral narrative tradition as a basis for many African-American novels. He refers to what the anthropologist William Bascom has termed “verbal art” as “an important means of maintaining the continuity and stability of traditional African cultures” (Bell 15-16). While Bell is focusing on African-American fiction, his study applies to other cultures rooted in the oral tradition, especially contemporary Appalachian fiction.

When considering Bell’s assertions, one can make an easy leap from his ideas to their connections to Appalachian literature. Bell observes, “For the anthropologist . . . verbal art [forms] have four principal functions. They transmit knowledge, values, and attitudes from one generation to another, enforce conformity to social norms, validate social institutions and religious rituals, and provide a psychological release from the restrictions of society” (16). When considering the strong oral tradition in Appalachian culture, a natural extension of this “verbal art” form is the novelist using music to form his characters and to breathe life into them.

Silas House saturates *Clay’s Quilt* and *The Coal Tattoo* with music: performed music, recorded music, composed music, radio music, and remembered music. One can hardly get further than a page without finding some kind of musical reference. House uses music in a multitude of ways in *Clay’s Quilt* and *The Coal Tattoo*: it defines his characters; serves as a window into their “emotional lives”; connects them to each other and to their past; and serves as a romantic bond between characters. For the main characters in these novels, Anneth Sizemore, Easter Sizemore McIntosh, Clay Sizemore, and Alma Mosley, music defines their identity and shapes their character within the larger narrative.

Peter de Vries offers applicable comments in his article, “Reference to Popular Music in the Novel: The Author’s Perspective,” published in *The Journal of Music and Meaning* in 2004. Being a novelist himself, de Vries comments on the use of music in the novel, and how it has “played an important role in the fictional novel for centuries” (Section 7.1). Music, he says, can be the focus of a novel, can define the structure, or comment on mood and setting.

When looking specifically at how “a particular song, album, or performer can also act as commentary on a character’s emotional life,” de Vries asserts that a “character’s preference for a particular type of popular music may not only tell the reader something about a character’s emotional life, but may also reflect the age or generation a character is from” (Section 7.1). The use of the phrase “emotional life” is fitting, and one that proves useful in examining House’s works. Silas House is very aware of the role that music plays in his writing. In fact, he heralds music in his fiction and in the lives of his characters, especially Clay Sizemore and Alma Mosley.

Earlier, this year, I conducted an interview with House, and asked him how he thinks of music in relation to his work. He responded:

Each of my books has a soundtrack. That’s one of the first things I do: gather music together . . . music allows me to perform a kind of spiritual research: it helps me to get into the hearts and souls of people from that time period, because music reflects the times more than anything else. I really immerse myself in a particular kind of music while working on a book. . . . I just can’t imagine *not* using music in my books. It wouldn’t make sense to me. (House Personal Interview)

It is clear from House’s comments that music is of vital importance to his writing. When asked how he sees music forming and informing his characters and writing, House explained:

I can’t imagine creating a character without knowing what kind of music they like. The very first thing I know about a character is their favorite song, or favorite type of music. That changes everything for me. In *Clay’s Quilt*, the first two times we see Clay we’re told right away what he’s listening to: Steve Earle and Dwight Yoakam. Knowing the foundation of his musical taste really helps me, and the reader, to know him completely, I think. It allows me to get under his skin. He sees life with a soundtrack, and that makes me know him in a way I wouldn’t otherwise. (House Personal Interview)

These allusions to Steve Earle and Dwight Yoakam resonate, and they occur early in House’s first novel, *Clay’s Quilt*.

Steve Earle sets the tone in the opening chapter when Clay plays Earle’s “I Ain’t Ever Satisfied” as he leaves work at the Altamont Mining Company: “he sang along without missing a word” (House, *Clay’s Quilt* 12). The song captures Clay’s restless state of mind as the novel begins, and it sets an appropriate theme for our introduction to the adult Clay Sizemore, a character who is restless and unsettled. Soon, Clay is on his way back to Free Creek, and he “[sings] along with Dwight Yoakam and tr[ies] not to pay attention to the homesickness swirling around in his belly” (House, *Clay’s Quilt* 20). Home, emotion, and music all come together in this brief reference. The nod to Yoakam works on both a musical level and a cultural level, as Dwight Yoakam is from Eastern Kentucky, the setting for *Clay’s Quilt*.

Later, Clay thinks about his upbringing. He was raised by his aunt Easter, but lived with his uncle Gabe. Music is a strong part of his early childhood identity within his non-traditional family unit, and he recalls hearing Loretta Lynn, Bob Seger, Tom Jones, and such songs as “Harper Valley P.T.A.,” “Love Is A Rose” and “Old Flames” (House, *Clay’s Quilt* 26). These musical motifs offer not only a reference for the characters and their musical tastes and a basis for Clay’s musical consciousness, but they also anchor the flashback in time, letting the reader know that the scene takes place in the 1970s.

Showing yet another angle to Clay’s personality, he and his best friend Cake listen

to Steve Miller in the car while getting high (51). Later, Clay dances in his living room to John Mellencamp, and thinks about his “wild blood” that he inherited from his mother and from their Cherokee and Irish ancestors (65). In another scene, he plays Tom Petty’s “You Don’t Know How It Feels” and Bob Dylan’s “You’re Gonna Make Me Lonesome When I Go,” while getting high and discussing his feelings for love interest Alma Mosley with Cake (104). This music shows a different side of Clay while highlighting his love of partying.

House introduces us to the child Clay and to his mother Anneth in the very first scene of *Clay’s Quilt*. The scene opens on a car full of women, one man, and four-year old Clay. The people are in danger, traversing an ice-covered mountain road; the atmosphere is tense. The scene ends with the violent murder of Anneth Sizemore, Clay’s mother. Through this early childhood trauma, Clay’s strongest surviving memory is of hearing his mother sing, during the final moments of her life, “Me and Bobby McGee” by Janis Joplin.

“I ain’t never seen a vehicle that didn’t have a heater or a radio. This beats it all to hell,” comments one of the women in the car (House, *Clay’s Quilt* 4). Since the car that they are riding in has no radio, the women decide to make their own music and begin singing “Me and Bobby McGee.” “Help us sing, Anneth! . . . I know you like Janis Joplin,” the woman says (4). Suddenly, the car has stopped, the mountain is quiet, and Clay lies against his mother’s chest in their last moments together:

He could feel the purr of her lungs against his face. It was the same song the women had been singing. Clay knew it by heart. He’d watched his mother iron or wash dishes while she listened to that song. Sometimes she would snatch him up and dance around the room with him while the song was on the record player. She had sung every word then, singing especially loud when it got to the part about the Kentucky coal mines. The vibration of her chest was as comforting as rain on a tin roof, and he fought his sleep so that he could feel it. She must have thought he was asleep, too, because finally she took her hand from his head and stopped humming. . . . That was the last thing Clay was aware of, but afterward, he sometimes dreamed of blood on the snow. (7)

In a brief and tragic moment, House uses music to capture the vibrant “aliveness” of Anneth’s character. In this scene and in almost every one that she is in, Anneth is always singing or dancing, perpetually full of life. In his second novel, *The Coal Tattoo*, Silas House continues to use music to characterize both Anneth and her sister, Easter.

A person’s first musical memory is always an enlightening glimpse into his/her consciousness. For House, this is especially true and he told of his first musical memory through a story about church, a memory which clearly inspires passages in his writing. Faith and music were inseparable for the young House, and they are seared together in his memories even today:

My first musical memory is of the pumping, grinding gospel music of the Lily Holiness Church, when I was about five years old. I often fell asleep while I played beneath the pews. I recall waking up one time and climbing up onto the empty seat. Almost everyone in the church was up front, dancing and running as a woman sang “There Ain’t No Grave (Gonna Hold My Body Down).” I had been raised in the Pentecostal church all my life, so I wasn’t alarmed that everyone was caught up in the spirit. But I couldn’t figure out where my mother was, because if she wasn’t in the pew with me she was usually up there singing, too. It took me a few minutes to see her, lying on the floor, trembling. I knew she was all right. She was what was called “slain in the spirit,” when the Holy Ghost is so strong upon a person that they’re thrown to the floor. A thoughtful sister of the church

had put a towel over her legs so her skirt wouldn't ride up. The people danced around her, their arms lifted high. (House Personal Interview)

Like the young House, Alma Mosley's character is also steeped in musical reference. Some of the references are specific to songs and musicians, while others are to music in a more philosophical and artistic sense. Alma, a fiddler, is a unique and distinct young woman, and House forms her in a very specific way.

Alma's main identity comes from her musical family, famous in the region for their gospel performances: "Their family was the most popular gospel group in the mountains. Everyone had heard of the Singing Mosley Family, and everyone loved and respected them. Being in a gospel group was second only to being a preacher" (House, *Clay's Quilt* 79). Alma's sister, Evangeline, was the star of the family before she left the group. Alma has always been in the background, and for specific reasons: her musical talent is playing the fiddle, considered an "instrument of the devil" that is still "too much for a church crowd" (80). As a result, Alma must contribute to the group in other ways.

House provides great insight into Alma's character through her thoughts about music. She ponders how her "father hadn't forbidden it, but she had known better than to want to play her fiddle in church. She had resigned herself to singing harmony at an early age. Instead, she had sold tapes" (80). Throughout her life, Alma has been pushed to the side or minimized; she feels like an outsider or, at the very least, unable to fully participate in the experience of the Singing Mosleys.

While driving her drunken sister, Evangeline, home from the Hilltop Club, Alma reflects back on how she:

used to sit in church and watch the way her parents and brother and sisters moved people and wish that she could do such a thing. She couldn't remember a time when she didn't feel guilty about something, and she had spent much of her childhood wishing she could move people to receive the Holy Ghost, fall to their knees in prayer, or burst out crying. She loved watching her brother's long white fingers race up and down the piano, loved the bump of her father's guitar, the exciting tingle of her sister's tambourines, the symphony of all their voices coming into one and hovering over a congregation like the Holy Spirit itself. (80)

Alma's memory is powerful and has stayed with her since childhood; this moment finds its origin in Silas House's own experiences as a child. He recounts one such memory from church, describing how:

The music was so fast and had such a good beat that you couldn't help but to dance to it, or at least pat your foot. Sometimes the people in the church would make one song last for twenty minutes. And there was no doubt about it, that music was powerful. I was almost numb to the goings-on at the church, but I knew the power of that music, music that caused holy ghosts to start stirring and caused my mother to fall onto the floor in convulsions. I think the only reason I wasn't terrified is because the music was so great. (House Personal Interview)

Clearly, House's own experience inspired his creation of Alma, as well as the details of her character's memory.

After she is sure that Evangeline has passed out, Alma puts in a Jean Ritchie tape. This brief moment is a great and almost secretive expression of Alma's musical taste and of her personality. House comments that "Alma loves the music of Jean Ritchie,

and most girls in the late 1990s, even in Appalachia, don't even know who that is. So right away I know about her respect for the past, I know that she has an acute understanding of lyrics and musical forms. So I know her in a whole new way" (House Personal Interview).

In a later scene at the Hilltop Club, Clay's best friend, Cake, and Alma are dancing. Cake "was a wild dancer" (House, *Clay's Quilt* 164), while Alma is more reserved, due to her strict upbringing. She tells Clay and the others, "When I was growing up, my daddy wouldn't let us dance" (163). As Alma and Cake go onto the dance floor, her sister Evangeline begins to sing Bob Seger's "Sunspot Baby" and Alma and Cake dance in perfect unison. This song, irresistible in its rhythm, is appropriately about a woman who leaves her man, a perfect parallel to Alma, who currently is separated from her husband; one of the lines from the chorus finds Seger telling how the woman in the song "packed up her bags and she took off down the road" (Seger "Sunspot Baby"). Alma becomes so absorbed that she dances with her eyes closed and "listened to her sister singing, to the band playing. . . . She thought of nothing but the music" (House, *Clay's Quilt* 164). She is in her own private musical world.

Not long after Cake and Alma dance, Alma realizes that her soon-to-be ex-husband Denzel is also at the Hilltop and she panics, fearing a confrontation between him and Clay. After he, leaves, she feels inspired to play a fiddle tune with the band and they choose "Bile 'Em Cabbage Down." House crafts a description of the music and its relation to the characters as he takes us inside Alma's head:

Alma began sawing away on her fiddle. It was a fast, exhausting piece that called for a banjo to back her up, but Lige and the band were keeping up. People rushed the dance floor. It was one of those songs that seemed to play on its own—the kind of song that let Alma know why people had once considered the fiddle the devil's instrument. It was wild and loud and set everyone to dancing or squalling or stomping their feet. (168)

She thinks of Clay during the song, as well. He "loved this song. He had said it sounded like the soundtrack to his life, and she loved that. So she gave the fiddle all of her strength, finally giving herself up to the song or the devil or whatever it was that filled her body with sensation and took control of her" (168). As the song continues, Alma spots Denzel, who has returned to the Club. When he comes over to talk to her on the stage, Clay comes up and confronts him, and a brawl breaks out. The "devil's instrument" certainly creates a stir in this scene, with fists and bloodied faces a result at the end.

Music is important to Alma's character development, and House already has shown her love of recorded music and of playing the fiddle. He also shows another facet to her musical nature: composition. We see her standing, playing her fiddle at seven in the morning: "A new tune had come into her mind late in the night, and she had not been able to go to bed for trying to make music out of it" (142). This is a new, though not unexpected, extension of her character. The act of composing music is consuming for Alma:

When a song came to Alma, she couldn't do anything until she had picked the right sound out of her mind. The fiddle seemed to take control of her, but only when the music was just right, only when Alma's fingers were able to find that ancient, singular place on the neck. Now, as she played with her head tilted to the side and eyes shut, it seemed she stood above the floor, dancing about the room without moving her feet. The song intensified, becoming wild and uncontained, and the fiddle took over. It pushed her arm up, pulled it down, made her fingers go where they needed to be. (143)

Alma is one with the music; she is physically and emotionally in sync with her instrument and with the “wild and uncontained” song that she is creating.

In a later scene, Alma is composing a new song, and House again shows her intensity and her actual physical connection to the creative process:

Alma was in the backyard, pacing back and forth like a lunatic, trying to scratch a new song out of her head. She held the fiddle lightly in her hands even though her anxiety had grown so fierce that she felt like throwing the fine instrument to the ground and stomping on it. She had woken up with the song swirling around in her mind and couldn't make it sizzle down her arm and out onto the stiff strings of her fiddle. She sawed away, closed her eyes, and walked all over the yard, aware of nothing but the fiddle. She hummed the song to herself, but she couldn't get it right. The bow screeched across the strings. (233)

This scene is different from the one earlier in the book; Alma is out of sync with her instrument and her creative nature. The song is there, but she cannot capture it. Instead, she is frustrated by its elusiveness. Although now married to Clay, Alma still fears repercussions from her ex-husband, Denzel. In fact, she had just seen him the day before this scene takes place, and she is uneasy about the ominous vibes that she got from him.

Alma continues working out the song. She “stroked the taut strings like a woman touching her child's hair” and thought that she would “stay out here until tomorrow morning if she had to, until blood ran down her arms and dripped from her elbows. She reckoned if she didn't get it out of her system, she would blow up” (232-33). As she grasps at the melody, the music becomes a reflection on her tenuous happiness, for Alma thinks:

When she caught the tune in her mouth and let it buzz on her lips, its melancholy melody reminded her of a life story being told. A history. She got the chorus down and played it over and over, making it perfect, like a man running a lathe over a thick piece of rosewood. The chorus sounded like a throaty lullaby, and within its notes she caught the name of the song. She played the chorus through again and sang to herself: “And that is the history of us.” (233)

Alma finally gets it. She breaks through the tension and finds musical resolution. Thankfully, the musical process parallels the path of her and Clay's relationship, with happiness to come for the pair after they make their way through some serious situations.

When dreaming of escape and talking about a spontaneous trip to the beach, Alma tells Clay that she has “dreamt of standing by the ocean and just sawing away at my fiddle, with water sliding up under my feet and the hot air making my strings soft and loose. In my dream, I play so hard and wild that eventually my body raises plumb off the ground to drift way out over that water” (195). Alma cannot separate her dream of escape from her music. In fact, one is explicitly tied to the other, and music is her vehicle.

Clay teasingly responds, “That's some intense music making,” and he is more intuitive than even he may realize. Alma explains to him, “I swear I've felt like that before. Not just in my dream. Sometimes, when I get a song just right, it's like I become a part of the music” (195). Music is significant to Alma; it is “part” of her.

By the end of the novel, Clay and Alma do make it to the ocean, taking a trip to Myrtle Beach after they marry. Alma gets her wish and is able to play her fiddle on the balcony of their hotel, which overlooks the beach. Due to the dramatic events

preceding their trip, Clay and Alma find themselves in a strange place in their relationship, and Clay is in a state of depression and separation from those around him. Thanks to their being away, however, Alma feels like “this place was reaching inside and stitching Clay back together” (271).

While Clay is out, Alma picks up her fiddle. She is beginning to resent being in South Carolina and to “blame him for bringing her there” (272). Alma

took her fiddle from its case and began to play the last song she had written. The first bars were so slow that they almost numbed her arm. The slow and forceful notes were meant to stir up the image of a ship pressing through ocean water. The rhythm rose as the people in her song began to trod land, climb mountains, bend to drink water from clear streams. The pace sped and curled as they cleared land, raised houses, and children. She closed her eyes and let the music lift her, carrying her out over the street, where she drifted up and down between block-shaped hotels and squat condominiums, rushing out over the surf, out into black air that swirled over black water. Finally, she was in the middle of the ocean, and the sky was so full of stars that it looked completely silver. (272)

At this moment, Clay comes into the room. At the same time, a man and woman on a nearby balcony compliment Alma on her playing, and ask if she wrote the song. When she tells them yes, and that the song is about her ancestors, the man compliments her again and says, “You mountain people sure can play music, I’ll say that much. Lot of musical talent comes out of those mountains. Why is that?” (273). Alma responds in anger to what she perceives as the man’s condescension, curtly telling him, “Us mountain people can do damn near everything good” (273). She is overreacting, striking out at strangers. She feels cornered and out of her environment, homesick and separated from her place. In fact, at the end of this scene, she pulls the Gideon Bible out of the drawer and randomly opens it to Jeremiah 12:7: “I have forsaken My house, I have left My heritage; I have given the dearly beloved of My soul into the hand of her enemies” (274). At this moment, Alma realizes that this verse applies to her, for she has forsaken her heritage, as well. It is time to go home.

House commented on the creative process as a whole and, more specifically, to playing music. When asked whether or not he is a musician, he responded:

I’ve always been a singer, so that was always informative for me, because I knew how the act of making music could transport you and allow you to escape. But I’ve only become a musician in the last three years. I now play guitar and a little bit of mandolin and autoharp. So now I think I can get inside a musician’s head even more. It’s a very different art form than writing in many ways, but in most ways, it’s the same. It’s a creative act, and that’s the main thing I’m going for in my life, the production of something creative. (House Personal Interview)

Insight into the “creative act” as it relates to music drives the inspiration for his creation of Alma Mosley’s character, and this angle adds a rich detail for the reader.

Music and the oral tradition are an important link to Appalachian culture and identity. When asked how he sees this link playing out in his writing, House responded:

I think our music is definitely one of the reasons that our distinct culture still exists while other particular cultures have fallen prey to homogenization and died out. Our music in Appalachia binds us and holds us together as a people. When you listen to a mountain song, you hear all the mixed emotions that go with being an Appalachian . . . mostly the longing that is involved. Because, as an Appalachian, there’s some kind of ancient longing that’s caught in all of us. We are a pining people. Maybe it’s because we’re all

missing Ireland or Scotland or Africa or our lost Cherokee lands. Maybe it's because we're missing a time when we truly were cut off from the rest of the world. But anyway, all the Appalachian emotions and traits are caught in our music: loneliness, longing, joy, dancing, toughness, wildness, homesickness, being hemmed in, everything. How can you listen to a raging banjo tune without feeling what it's like to have that wild mountain blood in you? It's impossible. (House Personal Interview)

House's ideas on this subject are echoed in the consciousness of many of his characters, and throughout his novels.

Silas House's use of music in *Clay's Quilt* and *The Coal Tattoo* is effective and thorough. He crafts these works by using "verbal art," defining his characters not only by their Appalachian heritage, but also through contemporary music and music from the last fifty years. As Bell shows in his study of the oral tradition in relation to African-American fiction, a "blend of oratory, oral narrative, and song, chanted sermons . . . contributed to the distinctive character of some black American novels" (Bell 22). So, while not new in the history of literature, House's use of music is significant for this use and as an extension of his literary heritage. House himself says it best when he explains that "[t]he best songs are stories and the best stories are songs. I think that most Appalachians are used to hearing stories in songs like 'Barbry Allen' or 'Knoxville Girl' or any number of Carter Family songs. It's in our collective memory, our DNA. For ages the major way that Appalachian people (and their ancestors in Ireland, Scotland, Africa, and Cherokee lands) had of keeping their stories alive was through music, ballads and the like. So it makes perfect sense how entwined they still are, today" (House Personal Interview). This insight ties together an inseparable musical culture, an Appalachian oral tradition, and the phenomenon of music as it relates to the identities and emotional interiors of the individuals in his novels. House brings all of these aspects together in the creation of art that is both real and distinct.

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