

Introductory notes on History and Popular Music

What sort of history will we be deploying in Sound Systems? For the most part we'll be deploying a history that focuses on the *key moments when radical new generic forms emerge*, and we will be asking two questions: (i) what were the aesthetic traits of these new genre, and (ii) why did they emerge at this particular historical juncture. In other words, we'll be trying to explain why jazz, R&B, rock, disco and a host of other genres not only sounded like they did, but also emerged when they did. The Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci described this as a "conjunctural" analysis — an analysis that focuses on particularly key moments of historical change.

As we go about our work, we won't be viewing music as simply *reflecting* society, but will work with a more flexible model in which the economic/means of production is central, but doesn't determine everything around it — a kind of approach that is coherent with a readings of history that range from contemporary materialist/Marxist approaches to historical writing, and which does not need to preclude a Foucauldian exploration of discourse. The key here, then, is to understand that music doesn't simply *reflect* reality [e.g. the idea that soul music grew out of the civil rights movement and reflected its goals], but also helps *create* reality [e.g. soul music was a key factor in the evolution of civil rights and its message].

History and power

At the same time, we also won't be viewing "history" as some kind of uncontested, straightforward narrative that can be retrieved by simply referring to the bare bones facts. One of the things that is so fascinating about popular music history is the way it gets to be written, and also the way in which a good deal of it doesn't get to be written about at all. This is because the writing of history is linked to the concept of power — and that groups in power will tell different stories to groups that aren't in power, and will have the means to get their stories distributed more widely. As a result, the history of rock (the preferred genre of many white straight men) has been perhaps the most told history of all popular genres, whereas the history of early black genres such as the blues, R&B and even funk have only really emerged in more recent years — as African American writers have found a voice and a means to get published. Then you could take something like disco, which is one of my areas of research, and it is interesting to ask why the history of disco wasn't written until a few years ago. That, presumably, has something to do with its core group, which revolves around black gay men and brings in black women for the ride. These are two of the least powerful groups in Anglo-American culture.

History, the facts, interpretation, the truth

At the same time, history is not just about stringing together a bunch of dates — the year someone bought a synthesiser, the time of night they first start to tinker with it, the label

that released the first record to feature a synthesiser, etc. Rather history is primarily about *interpretation* — not just what happened but *why* it happened, and this is the ground that we will be exploring. Of course once you enter the realm of interpretation you're also in the zone of argument, and these arguments can be supported by *evidence* (which can range from primary sources such as ethnographic accounts, magazine articles and music recordings to secondary sources such as books written on the subject). The best arguments are the ones with the best evidence — and of course the same can be said of good essays, too.

Discourse and positioning

Even with balanced evidence, it's worth bearing in mind that history is never complete — because the evidence can never be complete. Therefore histories are invariably partial, and can only be written from the knowledge of the time. That knowledge is grounded in what Foucault has described as *discourse* — the series of statements that make up the knowledge of a particular field. Discourses can be complex and contradictory — Foucault would say that here they make up part of a wider discursive formation. And Foucault would add that *dominant discourses reflect the interests of those who are in power* — not economic power but simply the power to wield control, which can range from the prison officer to the news editor. We are never above discourse or knowledge, and it can therefore work as an act of historical honesty to recognise our subjective positions within the historical process as we write.

Modernity and music

The history of Sound Systems begins with the history of Modernity — the Enlightenment rise of reason and science vs. emotion religion, capitalist industrialisation, manufacturing and mass reproduction, urbanisation, sophisticated transport networks/speed of movement. Within this context, music entered the realm of recording and reproduction, as represented here in the form of new recording technology that began with Thomas Edison's phonograph, a cylindrical sound machine, which dates back to 1877. The industrial development of the phonograph was slow because it could only record one cylinder at a time. As a result, Emile Berliner separated the process of recording and playback, with recordings chemically etched onto metal discs rather than cylinders. This process, which happened on the "phonograph", developed in 1888. Renamed the "gramophone", the equipment became a market leader and moved US music (and later Europe) into the realm of industrial mass reproduction.

With the technology to reproduce and play back music now available, the key question was how to market the music that existed. The key development here revolved around the introduction of the radio, which was inspired by the Italian inventor Marconi, who introduced "wireless telegraph" in 1896. Initially music publishers regarded radio as a threat to music sales — if people could listen to music for free, why would they buy it? — but eventually radio was understood to be an effective promotional tool.

It was in this context that Tin Pan Alley became the centre for the music industry at the turn of the century. The street had acquired its nickname — which referred to the clattering sound of the music makers plying their trade — as early as 1890. But back then there was no mass reproduction of recorded music: instead it was the site where music was created and then turned into sheet music, which was then distributed to theatres and publishers. But as recording technology and radio developed, Tin Pan Alley entered a prolific period, and between 1900-10 it produced 100 songs that sold more than a million copies. Oscar Hammerstein II, Irving Berlin, George Gershwin and Cole Porter were the key composers and lyricists from what has come to be known as the "Golden Age" of popular music, and their popular songs encompassed a wide range of musical forms, from dance bands that emulated the symphony orchestra, to individual instrumentalists and vocalists.

Black culture and the problem of modernity

Modernity, however, was a problematic concept and phenomenon for African Americans. After all, modernity was founded upon slavery. The first slaves had arrived in Virginia in 1619 and approximately 3.8 million slaves — mainly from West Africa — were to the New World by 1750, more than half of who were bound for Brazil and Spanish South America. When the Constitutional Convention of 1787 mapped out the US Constitution, slavery lived on, even though it violated Christian beliefs, English law and the principles on which the republic was supposedly founded. Slavery was formally abolished in 1865 and the period of "Reconstruction" followed, yet this hardly resulted in a new era of equality and integration. White Americans, no longer able to distinguish themselves from blacks via slavery, resorted instead to segregation, which was introduced by white-controlled state governments. As a result, black subjects positioned outside of modernity and were figured as being backward — of the body rather than the mind, savage rather than civilised, unruly rather than ordered, etc. As Paul Gilroy, writes, they were "*in an expanded West but not completely of it*".

Richard Crawford notes in *America's Musical Life* that it was assumed that the forcible removal of West Africans from their home would have destroyed their culture, but it is now clear that African oral traditions were maintained through slavery, often through music and singing. These black singing traditions were soon embedded in North American culture via (i) minstrelsy, (ii) spirituals, and evolved into (iii) ragtime and (iv) blues. The details of these musical styles are outlined in the introductory lecture to Sound Systems.

Conclusion: Black Music and Popular Music

So what we have here is the emergence at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries of a scenario in which popular music can be mass reproduced for the first time, and soon after

the domination of this new industry by popular songs that in many respects are white-oriented in their style.

At the same time, if in the background, however, a series of developments have resulted in the rise of a developed African American music culture that posits an alternative set of aesthetic values, even if it cannot find its way into Tin Pan Alley.

In many respects, then, Sound Systems will trace what happens to the song — to popular music and the popular form — for the rest of the 20th century, and, in particular, what happens when black music culture begins to influence popular music culture. What happens to songs when this happens? And what happens to them when, again largely as a result of black initiatives, the song is cut out altogether?