Evan Hackstadt

Professor Suzuki

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Class, Race, and Culture in 19th Century Recorded Sound

Music plays an integral role in shaping cultural groups, just as cultural groups shape music. The turn of the 20th century was a period of great change on both these fronts thanks to the propagation of recording technology and playback devices like the phonograph, microphone, and mass-produced record. While phonographic effects undoubtedly shaped and were shaped by the listening habits of various cultural groups, there were notable differences between the experience of the white domestic middle class from the 1900s onwards and Black musicians and audiences during the 1920s. The complex and transformative power of recorded sound is shown in both these cases, but subtle — and not-so-subtle — forms of racism and racial factors were also certainly present.

Before the turn of the 20th century, the Victorian middle class began to embrace the phonograph as a domestic item. The smaller middle class of the 1880s-1890s embraced Victorian ideals and traditions drawn largely from Europe. In domestic spheres, this manifested as parlor culture, or the "formal presentation and the maintenance of the family identity" (Sterne 204). It follows that early recording technology was used to this end: phonographs as expensive furniture units and delicate wax cylinder discs that could be recorded and replayed but also required preservation. Many of the earliest recordings from this era are examples of this type of use, such as Arlen Wesson and Harlan Watson's home recording of "One little girl for you." These records seem random, but they demonstrate the personal use of the phonograph in the Victorian home.

These ideals initially predisposed American attitudes towards European (classical) music and the acceptance of the phonograph.

However, as the middle class began shifting away from Victorian traditions, the use of music technology began to change. Alongside social changes like a growth of corporate capitalism, the middle class also expanded and embraced consumerism. Domestically, the parlor was replaced by the living room, which was "more informal in decor and arrangement and admitted more and more mass-produced goods" (Sterne 204). Mass produced goods like records, which innovated from wax cylinders to flat discs. Listening habits turned from appreciation toward enjoyment as the "separation of recording and playback… turned the gramophone into a means of consumption…" (Chanan 41). New mass produced records were for a different purpose than earlier home recordings. For example, another preserved recording, but this time from 1904, is a song "In the city of sighs and tears" with the genre tag "popular music" and published under the Columbia recording label. This recording is an early example of the emerging record industry that met the changing listening habits of the new middle class. Mark Katz offers a framework, "Phonographic Effects," through which to understand these changes. Phonograph discs differed from live listening in that they offered effects like "repeatability," "portability," and "affordability" (Katz). These three in particular align well with the consumerist values of the 1900s and onwards American middle class, so it's no wonder the technology took this path.

Even more shifts would occur in the following decades. With diminishing opposition to the genre and the advent of electrical recording, jazz recording and listening saw significant growth and change in the 1920s and 30s. Race records became a profitable sector of the record industry. These were records in popular genres, such as jazz and blues, recorded by Black musicians and marketed towards Black consumers. Socially, the accessibility of the phonograph

greatly expanded Black music for both listeners and creators: “Phonographic dissemination made jazz accessible not only to the listening public, but to aspiring jazz performer-composers as well” (Katz 81). At the same time, phonographic limitations affected jazz stylistically. Poor dynamic and frequency ranges resulted in the upright bass being swapped for the tuba while woodblocks and other percussion were favored over bass and snare drums (Katz). This limitation and the subsequent instrument choices are clear on jazz records. Take “Rocky Mountain Blues,” the opening track of *Duke Ellington, Vol. 2*. Mid-high brass and piano take center stage, but the only audible percussion takes place in the same frequency range. No bass drum is to be heard.

The advent of electric microphone recording augmented the genre, too. Microphones allowed for more natural recording and improved dynamic range. “As for singers, they even began to develop a ‘mezzo voce,’ a half-voice… in the hands of popular singers is called crooning” (Chanan 68). Intimate, dynamic crooning came to be heard on a number of popular jazz songs, such as Bing Crosby’s “San Antonio Rose.” Yet the microphone’s imperfections had their impact too. Duke Ellington was forced to transpose “Mood Indigo” due to a resonance in the mic created by the song’s original key (Katz). This is, of course, unnoticeable when listening to “Mood Indigo,” other than the fact that no such resonance is present. Once again, phonographic effects provide insights into these developments. The “portability,” “invisibility,” and “repeatability” of records helped jazz become a cultural listening phenomenon and inspired countless new artists. However, effects such as “temporality” had an arguably diminishing effect in that “the limited playing time of the 78 forced musicians to trim their performances, but even more, it discouraged improvisation as well” (Katz 84). It is clear that the growth of jazz was deeply interwoven with the growth of recording technology and its effects at the time.

Race was an important factor during both the expansion of mass produced records and of jazz. The experience of white Americans (especially consumers) and Black Americans (especially musicians) was distinct due to this factor. Firstly, segregation and institutional racism were very real at the turn of the 20th century. With mass-produced records came elite agendas of spreading "good music" (classical music) to refine tastes and morals. "Thus, black and white Americans cultivated 'good music' as a way to deny their inferiority, though while whites were responding to a European prejudice as much perceived as real, blacks were reacting to undeniable discrimination" (Katz 52). In other words, these classist ideals were concerning for all middle- and lower-class people, but also represented a worrying attack on Black culture.

Racial issues continued with the explosion of jazz and race records. While these developments do represent a flourishing of Black creativity and musicality, they nonetheless took place under a white-dominated capitalist system. Firstly, race records should be placed in the historical context of racial violence in the US: "Bookending the birth and demise of Race Records were some of the worst incidents of white-on-black violence in American history" (Ackermann ¶2). Secondly, race records should be seen commercially as an exploitation of Black creativity for white profit. "Race Records were subsidiaries of larger, white-owned labels, or related entertainment companies, that exploited black artists. These companies withheld royalties from black artists and often coerced artists to relinquish rights to their music" (Ackermann ¶3). While recording indeed helped expand Black musical culture, the industry motivation was quite the opposite. "The record companies sponsored and encouraged the blues partly because the songs were based on folk material, and therefore did not cost them copyright…" (Chanan 47). It is clear that, even though jazz was central to the development of Black culture (e.g. the Harlem

Renaissance), there were significant racial barriers and exploitations that restricted and complexified this movement.

Recorded music also took on inherently different meanings and effects for Black and white audiences and performers. As discussed above, "...music became a vital form of assertion of black identity" within a time of prevalent racism (Chanan 44). Recording technology was also woven into Black musical tradition: "...the ten-inch, 78 r.p.m. disc gave a home to the genre called the 'classic blues'" (Chanan 47). Additionally, due to the nature of the genre, jazz musicians still retained some control within the exploitative race record industry. "Even when music publishers reasserted their hold over the recorded repertoire, musically their control was limited… black audiences… preferred a jazz backing, and the publishers lacked the wherewithal to provide it… 'the musician retains a degree of autonomy that is denied in musical forms that can be fully expressed in notated manuscript'" (Chanan 47). Essentially, because so much of the appeal of jazz was derived from its improvisation and artistic creativity, it couldn't be controlled or manufactured as well as other genres. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the commonly recognized first jazz recording was "Livery Stable Blues" by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band — a group of white men. While it's true that the most popular jazz records would come to center around Black artists, this ironic fact marks the imposition of whiteness in the genre.

This difference leads to a larger cultural contrast between European and African / African American musical traditions. "For Afro-American culture, on the other hand, the record is a means, frequently the only means, through which music is propagated… Notation, if used at all, has only limited utility… This is like jazz, and completely different from the European tradition…" (Chanan 52). In jazz and blues traditions, records weren't the object of importance: the music itself, and its social and cultural potential, held the real value. This contrasts white and

classical notions of music that emphasized the score and proper performance of the score, which translated into proper recordings (objects) of the original work (an object). Nonetheless, jazz was still grown and limited by the physical record, and jazz musicians were exploited by it. Cultural differences were at the center of the unique listening habits found as early recording technologies developed.

It is clear that technological development is not the sole driving factor for recorded sound. Social changes and cultural practices ran parallel to technology. Of these, race is impossible to ignore. These factors are directly responsible for our current conceptions, practices, and mediums of recorded sound and music.

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