

Rockin' Out: Popular Music in the U.S.A.

Chapter 2: The Segregation of Popular Music

Outline

Introduction

- a. Before recording, music companies did not differentiate their audience.
- b. Musics that enjoyed considerable overlap in cultural terms have been documented and discussed as if they had separate histories.

2.1: Blues, Jazz, and Country

2.1: Describe multicultural influences in blues, jazz, and country

- a. The terms *hillbilly* and *race* separated musics more in terms of the color of the musician than the style.
- b. The blues were fundamentally African American, originating in field hollers and African call-and-response.
- c. Jazz combined improvisatory blues styles with the notated tradition of syncopated rags.

2.1.1: The Multi-Ethnic Roots of Country

- a. The fiddle was a central binding agent in country music, which was influenced by a wide variety of cultures.
- b. Despite its African derivation the banjo became progressively less identified with black musical styles over time.
- c. The guitar was simultaneously used by black and white musicians. As a blues instrument, its vocal qualities were developed.

2.1.2: Crossing the Racial Divide

- a. Folkloric musical characters also cut across racial lines.
- b. Segregated groups were often placed in the opposite racial marketing category because they “sounded” white or black.

2.2: Race Music and the Segregation of Sound

2.2: Summarize the careers of prominent musicians of the race-music genre

2.2.1: The Birth of the Blues

- a. Early blues can be divided into “country blues” and “classic blues.”
- b. The era of women blues singers began with the recording of “Crazy Blues” by Mamie Smith in 1920.
- c. The surge of classic blues was followed by more recordings of country blues artists like Blind Lemon Jefferson.
- d. Field recordings brought wider recognition for country blues artists like Robert Johnson.

2.2.2: All That Jazz

- a. The New Orleans mixture of styles that became jazz started in New Orleans at the turn of the century with Buddy Bolden.
- b. In 1914 the New Orleans style of syncopated dance music spread across the nation.
- c. Fletcher Henderson was credited with inaugurating the “big band” era of jazz in New York in the mid 20s.
- d. Duke Ellington began his rise at the Cotton Club in the late 20s.
- e. Count Basie’s band remained committed to the dance orientation that paved the way for rhythm and blues and rock ‘n’ roll.

2.3: Hillbilly Music and the White Working Class

2.3: Describe the success of hillbilly music and the musicians who popularized it

- a. Hillbilly music suffered and profited from a conflicting set of images held by Americans that ranged from stability and enchantment to decadence and cultural degeneracy.
- b. The Carter Family explored the traditional folkloric component of country music.
- c. Jimmy Rodgers represented the archetypal “ramblin’ man.”

2.3.1: The First Country Star

- a. Rodgers performed across racial lines and with Hawaiian steel guitarists.
- b. He influenced a generation of country musicians.

2.4: Disseminating Blues, Jazz, and Country

2.4: Explain the temporary decline in popularity of blues and jazz vis à vis country music in the early twentieth century.

- a. Broadcasters and film producers in the late 20s and 30s favored country musicians over blues and jazz.
- b. Radio featured mainstream tastes, not grittier forms of music.
- c. Eventually, the Grand Ole Opry overshadowed all other country broadcasts.
- d. Western motifs and the “singing cowboy” image became prevalent.
- e. Country’s cultural mixing paved the way for Rock ‘n’ Roll.

2.5: The Long Road Back for Records

2.5: Describe the role of the jukebox and other technological advances in bringing the record industry back to its earlier levels of prosperity

- a. After the Depression, bars and nightclubs began using jukeboxes leading to a mass audience for records.
- b. In 1932, the Duo Jr., a record player that could run through a radio, was marketed.
- c. Columbia producer John Hammond brought a diverse array of talent into the recording studio, influencing the music world in significant ways.

Recommended Activities

1. Play this video for the class of June Carter singing:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hoUn1ffpKsA>

Play a bit of the banter. At 5:47 June sings a song. Ask them what kind of music this is. Have everyone write down one word on a piece of paper. It's actually a typical blues form with a bridge. How many say country? Discuss the implications of this.

2. Put students in groups of three. They will write the words to a classic blues in the style of Bessie Smith. This means a 4-bar phrase that is repeated, followed by another phrase in an *aab* rhyme scheme. Have each group write the *a* phrase. Then have each group pass their words to the next group. This group will write the *b* phrase. Pass it along. The third group will assign melody to the words. One or more student from each group will perform the song for the class.

Discussion Questions

1. Is it possible to talk about popular music without using terms that were employed to segregate music to sell to different audiences? What kind of terminology would you use?
2. From Electro-Rock to Air Pop, there are many new musical terms out there today. Ask students to list musical designations that exist for genres of music today. How fine can they slice it?
3. Have students listen to Robert Johnson's *Me and the Devil Blues*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MCHI23FTP8>

Now listen to Blind Lemon Jefferson's *Black Snake Moan*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3yd-c91ww8>

Discuss the differences between the two in terms of form.

4. How have the two opposing images from early country music played themselves out over the years in different strains of music? Who can be identified as in the "ramblin' man" camp and who might fit with the "family values" camp?
5. Why is it that the first country star, Jimmie Rodgers, often played across cultures and yet there is so little of that now in country music?
6. Watch this video from a Shirley Temple movie:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtHvetGnOdM>

What kinds of thoughts and emotions arise watching this?

7. Have the class watch *St. Louis Blues* with Bessie Smith

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6kbQmjD_Jk

Is there a discernible difference between images of African Americans in this movie as opposed to those in Hollywood movies of that era (and later eras)?

8. Ask the class: What typical images come to your mind when you think of “country music”? What have you learned that does not fit your stereotypes?
9. There has been a market recently for a return to records. Why do you think that is?

What is your preferred medium for listening to music?

10. John Hammond called for a “lessening of differences between country and popular music, between folk, rock, jazz, gospel, and other categories.” To what extent has his plea been answered?

Recommended Listening

“Crazy Blues”

Artist: Mamie Smith (1883–1946)

Music/Lyrics: Perry Bradford

Label: Okeh (1920)

“Blue Yodel #9 (Standin’ on the Corner)”

Artist: Jimmie Rodgers

Music/Lyrics: Jimmie Rodgers

Label: RCA Victor (1931)

“Crossroad Blues”

Artist: Robert Johnson

Music/Lyrics: Robert Johnson

1937 Vocalion Records

“St. Louis Blues”

Artist: Bessie Smith

Music/Lyrics: W.C. Handy

1925 Columbia Records