

Book Review

Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop

Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr.
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Guthrie Ramsey's *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* is a fascinating account of the relationship between music and African American identity. Surveying an array of black music styles – blues, bebop, rhythm and blues, soul music, gospel music, and hip hop in films – Ramsey explores ways that African Americans have identified themselves in music. He draws upon his experience as a jazz and gospel pianist and his family's participation in the Great Migration to generate an ethnographic method positioning family narrative at the intersection of racial identity and musical expression. He is also concerned with the ways in which African Americans have used music to construct positive and flexible concepts of "race." As Ramsey argues early in the book:

"My use of the term *race music* intentionally seeks to recapture some of the historical ethnocentric energy that circulated in these styles, even as they appealed to many listeners throughout America and abroad. [...] I use the word *race* [...] not to embrace a naïve position of racial essentialism, but as an attempt to convey the worldviews of cultural actors from a specific historical moment." (3, original italics)

Ramsey's explanation of "race music" or, rather, *raced* music, resonates in interesting ways with the concept of "race records" that emerged in the young American recording industry in the 1920s. The success of Mamie Smith's 1920 recording of "Crazy Blues" prompted early record labels to initiate marketing campaigns targeting African Americans, Italian Americans, Jewish Americans, and others as distinct markets with specific musical tastes connected to their racial and ethnic identities. This trend substantiated a form of racial essentialism in sounds; record company executives assumed a homology between race and music consumption. In reality, however, American listening habits traversed racial and ethnic boundaries, creating a series of musical interculturalities (see Slobin; Stanyek) evidenced in listening habits during the so-called "Jazz Age" and "Swing Era" of the 1920s and 30s. During this period, African American music became America's popular music. While this intercultural listening challenged the marketing of "race records," assumptions about racial identity and musical meaning continued to structure the way African American music was portrayed in American popular culture.

Race Music strategically reclaims the notion of "race" from the inside out, from an emic or insider's view of black music and its relationship to African American culture. Ramsey's race music (re)presents the creative strategies African Americans employed in crafting their own identities in sound and how those sounds circulate as symbols in a variety of social contexts. Like the New Negro discourse of the Harlem Renaissance and the concept of Black Art during the 1960s and '70s, Ramsey's race music is about self-determination, about reclaiming the ability to define oneself in sound.

Ramsey develops three historical frameworks for locating the articulation of music and identity: Afro-modernism in the 1940s, black nationalism and soul music in the 1960s, and the "post-industrial moment" of the 1990s. These three historical frames illustrate important moments in which new understandings about the relationship between racial and musical identity were conceived in African American culture. One moment focuses on musical experimentalism and ideas about "modernity" in the 1940s that led to the creation of bebop. Ramsey also demonstrates how critical thinking about "blackness" in the 1960s helped shape African American literary criticism, musicology, family narrative, and new popular music forms (like soul). He also examines hip hop films and contemporary trends in gospel music during what he calls the "post-industrial moment," the era of high-speed commercialization and great change in African American communities.

These topics are prefaced by an intensely personal autobiographical account of the author's musical development, the "ethnographic truth" as Ramsey elaborates later in the book. Chapter 1, "Daddy's Second Line: Towards a Cultural Poetics of Music," draws its name from the celebratory aspects of New Orleans funeral marches and focuses on the connections between musical meaning and the private social space of family. The chapter traces the author's musical development, from singing in church choirs as a child, to becoming an aspiring young jazz pianist (influenced by Von Freeman), to being "saved" and reemerging as a church and gospel pianist, to the surprising decision to

become a musicologist, and concluding with the funeral of his father. Ramsey's autobiographical narrative reveals many of the principle themes of the book, illustrating the deeply personal form of critical ethnography that reappears throughout. He argues that:

"my attention to family narrative (and other community theaters) brings a new dimension to the 'folk-commerce-art' figuration into which many music studies are locked. This intervention does not sidestep the tension between these three domains but offers a new slant on their relationship. [. . .] I am thus arguing that family narrative offers my Afro-cultural poetics a kind of ethnographic perspective – a commitment to lived experience – that will, I hope, shed light on ethnicity's role in the production of musical meaning" (34).

Ramsey's focus on "community theaters," or "sites of cultural memory" (4), connects historical trends to private, often family-based, social formations. He reveals how intimate and local social contexts act as dialogic spaces for the *race-ing* of music. These community theaters "include but are not limited to cinema, family narratives and histories, the church, the social dance, the nightclub, the skating rink, and even literature [. . .]" (4).

Chapter 2, "Disciplining Black Music: On History, Memory, and Contemporary Theories," surveys a variety of approaches to theorizing black music, positioning Ramsey's ideas about ethnography and collective memory against prevailing critical stances. It quickly becomes evident that he is largely indebted to the discourse of African American literary and music scholarship that developed during the 1980s. In a section titled "Call and Response: Writing Black Music Scholarship After the Elders," he makes this connection explicit, drawing from Albert Murray's *Stomping the Blues*, Samuel Floyd's *The Power of Black Music*, Henry Louis Gates' *The Signifying Monkey*, Sterling Stuckey's *Slave Culture*, and others. Although Ramsey is aware of trends in African American scholarship that have worked to de-essentialize the idea of "blackness," he is nevertheless attracted to modes of "tradition" that center experience and recognize a core set of black artistic and cultural practices. He even invokes Amiri Baraka's concept of the "changing same" (36).

Ramsey draws upon the stances developed by these influential African American theorists to help explain:

"what a musical style means to a specific audience and, in particular, how that meaning is conveyed. Americans' perceptions of their racial, ethnic, nationalistic, and religious identities, as well as their class statuses, have been unquestionably mediated by the various musical styles that have either appeared or have been transplanted here since Africans and Europeans crossed the Atlantic." (37)

Indeed, Ramsey is indebted to Murray, Floyd, and Gates in his presentation of "tradition" as a codified idea. He illustrates the development of African American music as a series of negotiations between present and past, between contemporary musical practices, their connection to racial identity(s), and ideas about historical continuity. In the context of these critical discourses and their "reconstructionist"¹ ethos, the most promising conceptual contributions from the book are Ramsey's intensely personal focus on the role of family in creatively articulating sophisticated modalities of "blackness" in changing historical circumstances. Ramsey's focus on private, family-oriented social spaces helps elucidate the complex calculus underpinning collective negotiations of emergent forms of racial identity in public social spaces, in the so called "public sphere." The interplay of private and public social spaces casts much light on the role of music in crafting "blackness" from within African American culture.

Ramsey's sense of ethnography overlaps in important theoretical ways with the field of "critical ethnography," evidenced in the work of Paul Atkinson, Jim Thomas, and ethnomusicologists Gregory Barz, Timothy Cooley, and Kay Shelemay, to name a few.² These scholars theorize the connection between ethnography and intervention, mapping the boundaries between researcher and subject. Cooley, for example, seeks to broaden ethnomusicology by recognizing "our own shadow among those we strive to understand" (4). Ramsey's focus on the "ethnographic truth" contributes to this discourse. Invoking Sherry B. Ortner's concept of "ethnographic refusal," he argues that ethnography often focuses too narrowly on the relationship between subordinate and dominant groups (22-26). Ortner and Ramsey believe that much can be learned from struggles *within* subordinate groups; Ramsey's prioritization of family as a "community theater" emerges from this perspective. He argues that:

"More attention, for example, should be paid to the more 'private' spaces of blackness – the 'drylongso' ways in which black ethnicity is 'performed' outside of the public discourses upon which scholarship usually relies to access and represent black ethnicity. I argue that interrogation of this arena of cultural memory and historical concerns will enable one to perceive more accurately connections that exist among community theaters, collective memory, and musical practice." (25)

Additionally, Ramsey's nuanced sense of race music shares many aspects in common with the post-colonial hybridity theories of James Clifford, Homi Bhabha, Arjun Appadurai, and others (the latter, in particular, figures prominently in the book). Appadurai's work is often called upon in ethnomusicology to explain the role of globalization in catalyzing new musical and social interculturalisms. *Race Music*, on the other hand, draws upon hybridity theory's focus on personal agency in crafting musical meaning and its intersections with racial identity. For Ramsey, musical understanding is dialogically constructed in familial and in-group social settings.

Chapter 3, "It's Just the Blues': Race, Entertainment, and the Blues Muse," examines the role of the blues in African American culture. A major theme of the book surfaces in this chapter, what Ramsey calls the "North-South cultural dialogue" (47). This North-South dialogue is a conversation between regional manifestations of African American culture in the United States, largely resulting from the Great Migration from the rural South to urban northern cities after Reconstruction and through World War II. Within the construct of the Great Migration, Ramsey shows how the blues represents the "agrarian South" while jazz represents the "urban North" (47). North and South are rhetorical devices that help map the "migrating blues muse" (47). They are symbolic terrains that represent the shifting meanings of home during transitory cultural moments.

Ramsey uses three primary case studies and a variety of musical and textual examples to examine the "blues muse," focusing on Dinah Washington, Louis Jordan, and a somewhat more limited discussion of trumpeter Cootie Williams. Jordan's early rhythm and blues illustrates in high relief the North-South dialogue, appropriating language and other cultural signifiers (like the fish fry) that denote black Southern culture while embracing new musical and fashion trends rooted in urban culture. A consummate entertainer, Jordan's music symbolizes a fusion of older southern working class culture with a new musical language of urbanity and Afro-modernism. Ramsey draws upon the work of historian Nelson George to show how songs such as "Saturday Night Fish Fry" and "Ain't Nobody Here but Us Chickens," two Jordan classics, exemplify this rhetorical tension. In his discussion of Cootie Williams, Ramsey explains the conflict between older performance practices in jazz and the emergent practices of bebop in the 1940s. Although he is well known for his career with Duke Ellington, Williams has been the subject of little scholarly attention. Ramsey focuses on Williams' work as a bandleader in the years following his successes with Ellington, outlining his performance of Ellington-era songs and his use of arrangements by bebop pianist Bud Powell. The strongest section of Chapter 3 is "Politics, Twisting, and Jazz in the Church," an interesting discussion of the North-South rhetorical tension in gospel music in the 1940s. This tension is illustrated in the reaction to Mahalia Jackson's "bluesed" version of Reverend William Brewster's gospel classic "I Will Move on up a Little Higher." By joining the blues and gospel, Jackson's reworking of the song challenged the sacred/secular divide in Chicago's gospel community, initiating a version of Afro-modernism that Ramsey argues is indicative of innovative gospel composers like Thomas Dorsey.

Chapter 4, "It Just Stays with Me All of the Time': Collective Memory, Community Theater, and the Ethnographic Truth," illustrates in grand form Ramsey's ethnographic and narrative methodologies that center the role of family in communal memory and as a "community theater." With references to Appadurai, he explains collective memory as "how individuals begin to imagine themselves and feel as one group, connecting their past, present, and future" (77). The chapter is structured around interviews conducted with Ramsey's mother, aunt, and uncle. The discussion focuses on life in the rural South, including occasional references to the role of music and identity. These interviews also demonstrate matriarchal power in African American families. Ramsey's female relatives portray a family centered around the leadership of strong women and marked by challenges faced by African American men in a racist society. In more subtle ways, Ramsey shows how the African American family functions as a "community theater," as a site of communal memory and the construction of musical meaning.

Ramsey takes on several important debates about the emergence of bebop in Chapter 5, "We Called Ourselves Modern': Race Music and the Politics and Practice of Afro-Modernism at Midcentury." He defines Afro-modernism as "African American responses to the experience of modernity" (97) and shows in great detail a variety of ways that "modern" identity is revealed in music. In one of the strongest chapters of the book, Ramsey argues that "the thrust of Afro-modernism has *always* been, in my view, defined primarily within the sociopolitical arena: as the quest for liberation, freedom, and literacy as well as the seeking of upward mobility and enlarged possibilities within the American capitalist system" (106; original italics). He uses this standpoint to argue against standard views of bebop as bohemian, socially disengaged, "autonomous" art (the art for art's sake concept). Many portrayals of bebop's beginnings in late night Harlem jam sessions at Monroe's Uptown and Minton's Playhouse and along Midtown's 52nd Street are drenched in romantic counterculture imagery. Ramsey problematizes this by showing how Afro-modernism functioned in the music of Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, and others and the language through which they described their new musical ideas. In particular, he argues that bebop, what Gillespie and others called "modern music," was non-autonomous; it directly engaged the social contexts out of which it emerged. A striking contrast from ideas about "modernity" that suggested autonomous detachment from social contexts, bebop was ripe with political and cultural issues. At the same time, Ramsey argues that studies of African American music frequently employ a kind of "crossover" (ethno/musicological) methodology that challenges the distinction between autonomous

and non-autonomous musical meaning. For Ramsey, “any argument that music from black practitioners could exist within the autonomous realm should be considered a politically charged statement that invested in the music itself a special kind of *social* signification” (109; original italics). Arguing that artistic autonomy was linked to European ideas about modernity, Ramsey explains how the connection between identity and music in American culture is charged with assumptions about artistic value and racial essentialism.

Chapter 6, “‘Goin’ to Chicago’: Memories, Histories, and a Little Bit of Soul,” presents new ways of thinking about black nationalism and self determination in the 1960s. Ramsey interviews both his maternal and paternal relatives, focusing on their migration stories from the rural South to Chicago. Musical meaning is closely connected to ideas about the North and South; jazz is a symbol of northern urbanity, modernism, and new life situations, while the blues is a symbol of Southerness, of a more laidback rural sensibility that marked much of the Ross’s lives before moving to Chicago.

The extensive interviews are followed by a discussion of African American women writers during the 1960s and 70s, the decades that witnessed the emergence of black nationalism and black power. Ramsey argues that “black feminists fought against two kinds of invisibility. One kind involved distinguishing their concerns from those of white feminism. The other involved exposing and critiquing the masculinist emphasis of black nationalism, even as these women drew energy from it” (155). After mentioning writers Toni Morrison and Alice Walker and black literary critics Mary Helen Washington, Barbara Smith, and Barbara Christian, Ramsey focuses on musicologist Eileen Southern’s *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (1971), a work that he considers to be the first black musicology written by an African American female musicologist. Somewhat ambivalent about her connection to black nationalism, he struggles to locate her cultural politics, awkwardly moving to a much more detailed discussion of Amiri Baraka’s *Blues People*. Chapter 6 also includes a brief discussion of James Brown and the role he played in crafting a new politics of blackness. Brown captured America’s imagination in the 1960s and 70s with his fiery brand of rhythm and blues. Ramsey recalls from his experience that “James Brown ruled the private and public cultural spaces of black Chicago” (149). Through lyrical and rhythmic analysis, he argues that Brown’s music offered African Americans a new language for expressing social identity that, like Louis Jordan’s music two decades earlier, was rooted in the North-South cultural dialogue.

Chapter 7, “Scoring a Black Nation: Music, Film, and Identity in the Age of Hip Hop,” completes Ramsey’s survey of black music styles by focusing on hip hop, and what he calls the “post-industrial moment.” Instead of using the more common term “hip hop generation,” Ramsey introduces the neologism “Age of Hip Hop” (the capitalization is used throughout the book). Ramsey explains that:

“If the 1920s were dubbed the Jazz Age and the 1960s marked the ascendancy of rock, then a strong case can be made for calling the last decades of the twentieth century the Age of Hip Hop. Hip-hop culture is virtually everywhere: television, radio, film, magazines, art galleries, and in ‘underground’ culture. It has even surfaced in congressional hearings. And even where hip-hop culture is not found, its absence may also be understood as a reaction against it. Wynton Marsalis and a host of other critics, for example, have positioned their musical work against hip-hop’s musical and thematic conventions.” (164)

Ramsey’s point that the “absence” of hip hop is a kind of critical statement is illuminating. Through commercialization and marketing, hip hop has become the *de facto* signifier of black musicality in mainstream America. By revealing hip hop’s contestation within African American culture, the anecdote about Wynton Marsalis upsets the common assumptions about the connection between black culture and hip hop. Marsalis’ public image as jazz’s most celebrated neo-con is regularly invoked in public discourse; here Ramsey pits the celebrated trumpeter against hip hop. The youthfulness of hip hop is measured against the “classicism” of Marsalis’ conception of the jazz tradition.

Ramsey’s discussion of hip hop departs from the earlier chapters in several important ways. The strong ethnographic methodology is less present and we lose a sense of the author’s position vis-à-vis hip hop. Whereas the earlier chapters were marked by the author’s clear position within the study – frequent first-person references and family as a “community theater” – the discussion of hip hop shifts methodological gears, leaving some of the strongest theoretical perspectives behind. Instead, Ramsey provides a rather standard reading of music in three hip hop related films: *Do the Right Thing*, *Boyz in the Hood*, and *Love Jones*. His insightful analyses help explain the role of music in these “Age of Hip Hop” films, unpacking the thought-provoking work of directors Spike Lee and John Singleton. The shift away from family narratives, however, towards the community theater of filmic representations of blackness alters the author’s position in the study.

Ramsey’s take on these often discussed films helps highlight the role of music in representing hip hop identities. He claims that “If the blues muse of the World War II years existed as a basic ingredient in various styles, then we need

to try to identify, codify, and theorize the elements that make up a decidedly hybrid hip hop sensibility and ‘worldview’” (187). “Codify” and “hybrid” evoke a dialectic that resounds throughout much of *Race Music*. The discussion of hip hop films demonstrates this dialectic; we are treated to a reading of the films that, while critically fascinating, presents the works as unified wholes with almost uncomplicated meanings. Several questions are left unanswered, especially those addressing the connection between commercialism and racial representation: if race music is constructed in hip hop films, what is the role of the Hollywood film industry in mediating those meanings? Who controls the symbolic terrain of black musicality in film? Who profits through these images? Might there be conflicting “readings” of the meaning of music in these films by African American audiences? How does family, the “private” social context, contribute to readings of race music in hip hop films and the Age of Hip Hop? How might the North-South cultural dialogue factor into the construction of meaning in hip hop?

Ramsey’s final chapter of the book, “‘Santa Claus Ain’t Got Nothing on This!’: Hip-hop Hybridity and the Black Church Muse,” focuses on the cross-stylistic influence of hip hop and gospel music. The returning focus of gospel music brings with it many of the strengths witnessed earlier in the book. Ramsey first argues that hybridity has always been a function of black gospel, citing Thomas Dorsey, Rosetta Tharpe, Edwin Hawkins, and Andre Crouch as examples of gospel composers who drew upon blues, jazz, pop music, soul, and other black musical styles as influences (191). He provides a reading of the 1992 recording *Handel’s Messiah: A Soulful Celebration*, a compilation album that appeared under the industry label of “gospel,” presenting a variety of reworked songs from Handel’s perennial favorite. Drawing again upon Gates and Floyd, Ramsey uses the idea of Signifyin(g) to argue that “the concept of double consciousness no longer captured the complexity, elasticity, or ‘additive-ness’ to describe black cultural production or identity in the late twentieth century” (199). He elaborates by explaining the increased interconnectedness enabled through new technologies and industries:

“Because of the accelerated rate at which mass-media images and sounds circulate and the power of the global market assuring their influence during the Age of Hip Hop, the borrowing has intensified greatly since the high years of Afro-modernism outlined in earlier chapters. Thus the North-South dialogue of the 1940s grew exponentially over the years into an international, intragenre, interracial, intracoastal, intrahistoric conversation fueled, in part, by technological advances that have made access to musical gestures of the past (and contemporaneous ‘distant’ ones) more available and elastic. The musical tropes of Signifyin(g) have been wedded to innumerable styles and practices, demonstrating the bricolage, mosaic, pastiche, and additive impulses of contemporary hip-hop culture.” (199)

Ramsey’s argument here is rich and full of promise for future scholarship. The meticulous discussion of *A Soulful Celebration* supports his claims about the prominence of new hybrid artistic practices in contemporary black music styles.

Race Music successfully brings into dialogue an array of black music practices and goes far in explaining how musical meaning is constructed within African American communities. Many of Ramsey’s musical examples articulate historical shifts in black culture, supporting Stuart Hall’s argument that black popular cultures are “always conjunctural” (465). These conjunctural moments produce musical hybridities that often draw upon forms of experimentalism, improvisation, and code-switching. Ramsey’s focus on the “mainstream” – music that succeeds in the “American capitalist system” (106) – obscures the relationship between stylistic shifts in black music and experimentalism, between codified musical forms and strategies that upset social, commercial, and artistic expectations. Although he focuses on experimental moments such as bebop and forms of hybridity in gospel music, the role of improvisation as a form of social and musical engagement receives no detailed attention. Many of the numerous musical examples discussed in the book could help to explain the linkages between improvisation, experimentalism, and the social contexts in which new artistic ideas are produced.

Interestingly, *Race Music* begins with a nod to Muhal Richard Abrams, whom Ramsey encountered at a meeting of the Jazz Study Group at Columbia University’s Center for Jazz Studies. Abrams, founder and first president of the influential Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, urged Ramsey to stay connected to his roots, his community. Coming from Abrams, such a statement resonates on multiple levels, begging questions about experimentalism, community, racial identity, and Chicago’s South Side. In many ways, Ramsey’s ethnographic method accomplishes Abram’s challenge to remain at home, to theorize the meaning of black music from within the black community. From this perspective, *Race Music* offers much to those of us who study the relationship between community, improvisation, and racial representation.

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Notes

¹ A term developed by Houston A. Baker, Jr. to describe the work of Gates and Robert B. Stepto (Baker 302).

² For example, see Atkinson, Thomas, Barz and Cooley's edited volume *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, and Kay Shelemay's article within that volume.

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