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Review of The Music of Multicultural America

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The Music of Multicultural America: Performance, Identity, and Community in the United States

Edited by Kip Lornell and Anne K. Rasmussen

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The Music of Multicultural America: Performance, Identity, and Community in the United States is an overdue book which brings a breath of fresh air to a country which has been marked over the past year, since the end of President Barack Obama’s second term, with rampant xenophobia and despondent nationalism. Yet, as the editors and the contributors of the volume suggest, American society has rich musics that counteract such intolerance by standing as a testimony of the long-standing presence and participation of the world and its people in the fabric of the diverse communities within the nation. With careful insights and expert selectivity, each chapter delves into the distinct nature of creative musics and [or] dances that such various ethnic, regional, and cultural groups have contributed to American society.

Edited by Kip Lornell and Anne K. Rasmussen, The Music of Multicultural America aligns itself among many works that have been published since the 1990s. First, the editors give credits to “a handful of pioneering scholars” such as Sigmund Spaeth, who “wrote elegantly about popular music” (in the 1926 work, Read ’em and Weep: The Songs You Forgot to Remember”)

The second chapter, which follows Lornell and Rasmussen’s well-written and informative contribution serving as an introduction to the book, deals with the influence of Czech American polka music in Wisconsin. Here, James P. Leary examines the history of Czech migration into the United States while providing us with a thorough analysis of the role that polka music has had in Wisconsin, where it became an official state dance in 1993. In this chapter, one also learns that polka is part of a strong musical tradition that has influenced “the Cajun and zydeco music[s] of southwest Louisiana, the Mexican American *conjunto* music of south Texas” and musics from other parts of the United States [34]. But one also learns that polka has influenced the prominence of tuba and horn playing brass bands and bohemian halls’ musics in Wisconsin and other parts of the United States [37, 39]. Another take-away from this chapter is a call for scholars to avoid the neglect of “polka music” [35]. This neglect contrasts with “the considerable research devoted to America’s Anglo-Celtic and African-derived musical traditions” [35]. While one can hardly say that enough scholarship has been devoted to “African musical traditions” in the United States, one may agree that this scholarship may be more robust than the one about polka’s influences in America.

The third chapter is equally relevant. In this section, Ann Morrison Spinney explores the import of Irish musical and dance heritage in Boston. Using a transatlantic approach, Spinney shows the enduring significance of traditional and folk Irish music on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Later, focusing on Boston, she studies shipping records and other sources that “show the ebbs and flows of Irish immigrants to Boston from the early nineteenth century to the present” [61]. Drawing from census data and other records, Spinney provides a social and cultural history of the Irish community in Boston, revealing the creative ways in which Irish folk music has shaped the city’s urban and cultural life. In this city, Irish music is revived in pubs, ballroom dance
halls, local festivals, museum events, and other occasions and venues.

The fourth chapter is also relevant. In the chapter, Henry Sapoznik explores key aspects of the migration of Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe to the United States during the late nineteenth century while focusing on the strong influence that klezmer music has had in America. A pivotal moment in this history is the humongous role that the clarinet-playing style of Dave Tarras, one of these immigrants, had in New York in the 1940s. The author writes: “Tarras’s playing transformed the second generation of Jewish clarinetists with its new sense of style, interpretation, and orchestration and completely overwhelmed the previous European approach to the music” [88]. This statement and the other ones that Sapoznik makes about the strong impact of Yiddish music in America suggests that this country’s strength lies mostly in the creativity that its migrants from around the world have brought to it.

In the fifth chapter, we see a newly vibrant city of Detroit infused with charm and sounds of immigrants from the Arab world, specially from nations such as Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, Palestine, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and parts of North Africa. These migrants are part of the larger Arab American community which includes about three and a half million people [108]. They also deserve scholarly attention because they are part of a long history of Arab presence in the United States. This presence has been felt in the strong impact that Arab music and dance have had on American culture where it has been recreated by so many artists. For instance, as Anne J. Rasmussen writes, “Music and the contexts for belly dancing, an American craze with roots in the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago that reached its peak in the 1960s and 1970s, was created by American-born musicians of both Middle Eastern and non-Middle Eastern heritage” [117-118]. Reinvented in wedding parties, music festivals, poetry readings, and arts exhibits, Arab music thrives in Detroit, where it stands as a testimony to the power of culture to transcend the challenges of migration and form a community where patronage, performance, and expressive voice are paramount.

Chapter six is equally compelling. Here, Daniel Sheehy demonstrates the significance of Mariachi music not only in Mexico but also in the United States where it has been historically interwoven in various forms of rituals and festivals. This rich chapter provides a strong review of the history of “mariachi music” by first defining the term “mariachi” which “may mean a single musician, a kind of musical group, or a style of music” [139]. Another important expression is “mariacheros,” which is
“another term for mariachi musicians” who were known in Mexico “among their comrades by their nicknames ‘Santa Claus’ and ‘Jeremic,’ respectively” [139]. Exploring the interesting history in which Mariachi music was brought to the United States, Sheehy demonstrates the influence that the tradition has had in various states such as New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Maryland, Washington, D.C., California where they are celebrated in ensembles and other occasions. According to Sheehy, “[A]s the mariachi has become more a part of the broad cultural landscape of the United States, so have musicians of many cultural backgrounds taken up the guitarrón, vihuela, violin, or trumpet to play the sones, rancheras, boleros, and other musical genres at the heart of mariachi traditions” [154].

Like Sheehy’s chapter, the one of Christopher A. Scales and Gabriel Desrosiers also focuses on indigenous American musical cultures. The seventh chapter centers on the pivotal role that powwows have had in American societies. As Lornell and Rasmussen point out, “early powwows were a unique cultural fusion of the music and dancing featured at Wild West shows and the ceremonies to honor Oklahoma Indian warrior societies” [12]. Scales and Desrosiers provide a thorough study of the evolution of powwows from their early days to contemporary times. They show how “Many of the formal, organizational elements of the modern powwows are also drawn from a variety of historical tribal and intertribal practices. For example the Grand Entry that begins every powwow dance session over the course of a week-end event is widely believed to have been adopted from the Wild West shows and other traveling carnivals and vaudeville-type shows that were popular during the turn of the twentieth century” [165]. In this sense, Scales and Desrosiers draw attention to the strong imbrications between Native American and Anglo-American popular and musical cultures in the Western United States.

In the eighth chapter, James S. Griffith explores the history of waila musicians in southern Arizona. According to Griffith, the term “waila” describes a music and a dance. He states: “The music is called waila, from baile, the Spanish word for ‘social dance.’ Moreover, waila means polka as well as the whole genre of music. Another name for waila is ‘chicken scratch,’ which is a reference to an older dance in which the dancers kick up their heels behind them like chickens scratching in the dust” [192]. With in-depth attention to how waila has survived as a syncretic blend of Mexican, Native American, and other traditions, Griffith demonstrates the significance of a musical and dance culture that also means “polka” [192] and that survived in village feasts,
musics, and dances of the Yaqui and Pascolas people before settling in many parts of Arizona and the US-Mexico borderlands.

In the ninth chapter, Brenda M. Romero examines other musical traditions of Native American and Mexicano people, specifically those from southern Colorado and northern New Mexico. For instance, Romero shows that among the Pueblos, “Songs accompany all aspects of ceremony, representing an active force that can affect the order of things in the universe” [210]. Such a blend of spiritual, musical, and cultural events usually takes place in a “kiva,” which is the name for “a subterranean ceremonial space where ceremonies are rehearsed or conducted indoors in some Pueblos. Here, “song, story, and dance accompany ceremonies” with the backing of “double-headed drums” and “heartbeat-like beats” which, altogether, “assure the Puebloan’s harmony with the natural world” [213-214].

The tenth chapter, written by Ron Pen, explores another major Anglo-American heritage. This one is found in central Kentucky where Pen learns about the sophisticated singing styles of a community he calls “the fasola folks” [241] and their creative “shape-note hymns” [241]. This chapter is also important because it begins with a strong survey of the history of hymns in the United States, exploring how such a tradition was pervasive in colonial America despite the elite’s scornful attitudes towards it. Thus, as Pen argues, when New England psalm singers began to elongate ornament, vary, and lengthen melodies “in a musical texture called heterophony,” the response of some clerics was not jovial [242]. According to Pen, “Harvard-educated clerics who were greatly upset by the style of singing called it ‘a horrid medley of confused and disorderly noises’ and ‘the uncouth noise of untuned ears’” [242]. Yet such transgressive singing styles endured, finding their ways in central Kentucky where they survived along shaped notes, the Southern fasola singing style, and other musical and performance features.

Chapter eleven is also crucial because it juxtaposes well with the tenth one. Like Pen’s, Lornell’s section focuses on the creativity of a musical community that maintained its values despite the larger social forces that could have hindered its development. This chapter examines the role that “sacred quarter singing” has played in the history of African American music from Memphis. Moreover, the chapter walks the reader through the intricate history of the terms “family of singers,” “the gospel quarter community,” “quarter unions,” “training quartets,” and “song battles” in Memphis during the first
half of the twentieth century. A memorable statement in the chapter is as follows:

Before such black popular singers as Little Richard or James Brown gained the limelight in the middle to late 1950s, professional quarter singers like Silas Steele and ‘Jet’ Bledsoe of the Spirit of Memphis Quartet were highly respected for their ability to ‘work’ an audience … It became acceptable for singers to crawl along the floor or walk on the floor, behavior that strongly contrasted with the more sedate programs held in the 1920s or 1930s, before full-time professional groups began touring the United States [274-275].

Evidently, this chapter is required reading for any serious scholar of African American music.

Chapter twelve is no less deserving. Here, Gage Averill explores the important role that Trinidadian carnival has played in the formation of a diasporan and Pan-Caribbean identity that has established deep roots in the United States, especially in New York City where it is celebrated during summers. As this chapter suggests, Carnival is not only a major dance and music event accentuated with panyards and steelband music, but also a cultural celebration that revives harmony among a diasporan and Caribbean community that has enriched the United States with its creative sounds, rhythms, and people. A major concept in Averill’s chapter is the term “Pan” which “refers to the various instruments fashioned from 55-gallon oil barrels, which have the barrels cut at different heights and the bottom of the barrel pounded down and shaped into multiple note heads” [281-282]. Yet, as Averill argues, “Pan” is more than a musical instrument since it is the symbol of historical linkages between various parts of the Caribbean diaspora linking the United States to other parts of the world. Thus, as Averill notes, “Pan performances at Panorama in Brooklyn are linked to the previous winter’s Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago by the circulation of calypsos through the diaspora and by the flow of personnel (arrangers, calypsonians, and some pannists) among the various Carnivals” [300].

In the thirteenth chapter, Mark DeWitt explores the presence of Cajun music not in its conventional locations, such as Louisiana and southeast Texas, but in California. Focusing on the Bay area, specifically on regions from San Francisco to Oakland, DeWitt reveals the vibrancy of communities and fans of a music that was transplanted from the Bayou to the West Coast during the 1930s. Discussing this history of southern musical influence in California, DeWitt refers to “the Dust Bowl migration of the 1930s” and the 1940s “great migration of whites and blacks to California from the
South—especially Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana—for the World War II wartime industries of building aircraft (in Los Angeles) and naval vessels (in the San Francisco Bay Area)” [317]. Therefore, economic opportunity enabled the relocation of not only southern and creole communities to the Bay Area, but also of their distinctive Cajun and creole musics and cultures. This history led to the emergence of vibrant Cajun and Zydeco musics, dancing, and bands that have influenced California’s musical culture and communities in deep ways.

In the fourteenth chapter, Sarah Morelli also focuses on the San Francisco Bay Area, particularly on the influence of Indian music in the region. Morelli uncovers the significance of Indian classical music in the Bay Area, which sprang from the increased attention that was given to it in other parts of the United States. According to Morelli, even if “independent schools for Indian classical music and dance” existed in many parts of the United States, “one of the first such schools was the Ali Akbar College of Music, founded in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1967 by Ali Akbar Khan” [343]. Another major part of this history of Indian culture in America is the pivotal role that Kathak dance master Chitresh Dash played when he joined the Ali Akbar College of Music, “bringing the Kathak dance form to North America” [343]. But, as Morelli suggests, the Indian music influence in America started earlier, as was evident in the 1930s when “Indian ‘modern’ dancers Ram Gopal and Uday Shankar also toured North America” [348]. From this long history of Indian music and dance in the United States and, prior to that, of Indian Yoga, a vibrant culture with various communities and fans in the Bay Area has evolved.

In Chapter fifteen, Susan M. Asai reveals the richness of the Japanese American musical heritage on the West Coast, specifically in California. This section is another compelling contribution since it stresses the role that music plays as a tool for preserving an evolving cultural identity, gaining political force, and resisting marginalization. First, the essay provides a brief survey of the history of Japanese American music in the United States. One notices that, during the early twentieth century, there were already “musical activities in San Francisco and Los Angeles [which] serve as examples of issei (or first Japanese American generation) music making in urban centers” [369]. The second generation of Japanese Americans, or nisei, also had a distinctive music that was anchored in both the past and the present. According to Asai, their music “reflects the increased assimilation of Japanese Americans in the United States. Many nisei maintained continuity with the
past by sustaining musical traditions of their issei parents” [370]. By the 1960s and 70s, the third generation, or sansei, had expanded the Japanese American musical landscape by integrating a variety of sounds and styles. “The music they played includes European classical and contemporary styles, traditional Japanese music, Broadway musicals, jazz, soul, pop, assorted rock styles, country, funk, and various fusions of popular music” [372]. By exploring these important historical moments and examining their influence on later forms of Japanese American music, Asai allows us to further appreciate the blend of sounds, cultures, philosophies, and identities herein.

The sixteenth chapter, written by Theo Cateforis and Elena Humphreys, deals with the cultural history of Riot Grrrls. This is a unique type of Rock music which, like Punk and straight edge music, developed in New York City in the 1980s and 90s. Even if it particularly thrived in New York City, Riot Grrrls has deep roots from Olympia, Washington, where the term derived in 1990. According to Cateforis and Humphreys, that year, “Molly Neuman and Alison Wolfe, who together eventually would form the band Bratmobile, and Tobi Vail, one of the members of Bikini Kill—decided to react against that city’s stagnant male-dominated punk scene ... Through a series of meetings, they attracted other interested women, and soon they adopted the name ‘Riot Grrrls’ as a descriptive phrase for the group’s feminist-based ideas” [398-399].

Foreshadowing the popularity of social media in music communities, fans of Riot Grrrls were already using listservs in the 80s and 90s. This closeness to fans helped them create an underground form of countercultural revolution in which marginalized groups had a space to express themselves. For instance, as Cateforis and Humphreys write: “On a more private level, Riot Grrrls organized meetings where they could question gender roles and confront their identities while speaking openly about their experiences with rape, sexuality, racism, oppression, and domestic violence” [396].

The Music of Multicultural America : Performance, Identity, and Community in the United States reflects the great diversity within the United States in terms of cultures, musics, styles, and communities. The book revives our interest in American cultural studies, inspiring us to dig back into the past and surroundings to further understand and appreciate the musics, dances, and songs that Americans celebrate and have in common despite their various racial, ethnic, religious, gender, and sexual identities. Given the ways in which it
focuses on how music, dance, and songs allow communities with various backgrounds and interests to resist marginalization, *The Music of Multicultural America* is likely to be a timeless work of American cultural and historical studies.