"Other" Music: Race, Music, and Assimilation in U.S. History

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A question plagued the first director of the music division of the Library of Congress, Oscar G. T. Sonneck: What does the nation sound like? Indeed, at the dawn of the twentieth century many composers and conservative intellectuals fretted that American compositions amounted to feeble imitations of European masters. Convinced that a composer’s “innate Americanism” atrophied under European influence—“German music made in Germany by Americans,” he called it—Sonneck hoped that a comprehensive music archive at the Library of Congress would free U.S. composers from the necessity of consulting European conservatories. The growth of a distinctly national compositional style, he believed, could take root only in U.S. soil.

Inspired by Antonin Dvořák’s incorporation of Negro spirituals and Native American influences into his 1893 “New World” symphony, a cadre of nationalist composers sought distinction from their European counterparts by appropriating snatches of African American and Native American musical traditions. Given Oscar Sonneck’s position on “Americanism,” it is perhaps surprising that he disparaged this trend, calling it an “injection of folk-song virus” into U.S. compositions. While conceding that folk music might mitigate
a loss of national identity, Sonneck argued that it was a poor substitute for a composer’s creative genius and inborn Americanness. Moreover, he felt that the appropriation of folk music threatened the cultural and racial purity of the nation. Listening to America, Sonneck heard a fictional, racially homogenous nation—a United States where African Americans were second-class citizens, Native Americans unassimilable exotics, and Mexican Americans and Asian Americans perpetually alien. The only “real and pure” American folk songs were those that the “white elements of the American people brought with them to these shores.” At best, the use of folk idioms from nonwhite traditions could serve as a source of inspiration or give the listener “the impression of something exotic.” At worst, assimilating “exotic” music presented the “danger of an unnecessary musical miscegenation.”

Born in America to German immigrants, reared largely outside the United States in his parents’ homeland, and writing in 1916 amid the anti-German sentiment of the First World War, Sonneck silenced his ethnic difference and transnational identity with musical chauvinism. Promoting a mode of listening that excluded the music of racial and ethnic “others” positioned him more fully within the boundaries of American cultural citizenship and enhanced his own claims to Americanness. And just as he concealed his own transnational past through nationalist discourse, Sonneck used the phrase “musical miscegenation” to fix and stabilize the hybridity that is always present in music, recasting cultural mixture in racial terms.

The three books under review critically engage the racial and nationalist discourse surrounding music that Sonneck participated in a century ago. In doing so, they expand the breadth of a scholarly movement within American studies, led by authors such as Ronald Radano, Guthrie P. Ramsey, and Josh Kun, that analyzes music within the critical contexts of racial formation and the nation. As Radano has argued, the ways we discuss music have a tangible influence on the social and political world, because debates about music often act as social discourse. The reviewed works reveal that attempts to Americanize “exotic” music by silencing racial difference had parallels in projects to assimilate Native Americans and Mexican Americans into a culturally homogenous United States. Simultaneously, these works also illustrate how music facilitates the creation of American identities that recognize and celebrate difference, offering alternate visions for what it means to be (and sound) American. Finally, a close analysis of these texts trouble easy distinctions between the exotic and the normative, demonstrating once again the “self” and the “other” are mutually constitutive.
When nationalist composers turned to Native American music for source materials—over the objections of critics such as Sonneck—they often relied on transcriptions from the ethnologist Frances Densmore. In her lifetime, Densmore collected and transcribed more than two thousand Native songs. With each transcription she harmonized Indian melodies and tweaked Native notes to fit European scales, making Native American music assimilable by silencing dissonant elements. Yet Densmore’s Americanized transcriptions had an insidious analog. In *Indian Blues*, historian John Troutman places her among a cohort of ethnologists and composers who collaborated with the Office of Indian Affairs (OIA) in order to train Native American children to perform sanitized versions of Indianness that, like her transcriptions, were “removed from all elements harmful to white society” (167).

*Indian Blues* examines Native American music in the context of the United States’ campaign to assimilate Native Americans, a campaign that attempted to erase Native cultures and languages through education, fracture communally held tribal lands through allotment, and erode tribal sovereignty through legislation. Troutman offers new insights into this history, contending that the control of Native music should be considered integral to the larger assimilation effort.

For Troutman, music is more than sound; it is contested cultural terrain, the discursive product of a “cacophony of voices” that “encompasses not only singers, dancers, and musicians but audience members,” including the policymakers who attempt to regulate performances (66, 10). In five chapters, each covering a period from the late nineteenth century through the 1920s, he examines the struggles over Native American music in federal boarding schools, on reservations, and on public stages across the globe. With little access to mainstream political arenas, he argues, Native people strategically used music and performance to shape public opinion and challenge OIA policies. Ultimately, music served as both a “means of containment” and a “vehicle of liberation” (xii).

Detailing the Office of Indian Affairs’ attempts to suppress tribal dances on reservations, Troutman depicts an organization obsessed with applying racial distinctions to all musical practices. For OIA officials, Native dances and music fell into one of two categories: “safe” or “dangerous.” In one OIA commissioner’s view, dangerous meant “any disorderly or plainly excessive performance that promotes superstitious cruelty, licentiousness, idleness, danger to health, and shiftless indifference to family welfare” (68). Heard through this racialized framework, tribal music was antithetical to everything the OIA believed the
United States stood for. A threat to assimilation, music had to be curtailed through regulation, surveillance, and reeducation.

While Indian agents restricted participation in reservation dances to older generations in the hope that tribal traditions would perish along with the elderly, Native American children educated in off-reservation boarding schools such as Carlisle Indian Industrial School received formal training in “civilized” forms of music, training that went far beyond instruction in scales and solfège. Here, Troutman stresses music’s destructive side, particularly in a section describing how bandmasters harnessed the regimentation of marching bands to inculcate discipline and patriotism in students. One student, for example, recalled once hearing a march playing on a phonograph while she was away from school. Her steps immediately locked in time with the music, and to her dismay, she found it “impossible” to “break the rhythm” (118). As designed, music conditioned conformity to white expectations of behavior, etching regimentation into the muscle memory of Native students.

Troutman also contends, however, that music was one of the most significant weapons Native Americans wielded against assimilation. Students exercised creative agency through music, inventing new forms of song and dance that bent Western forms to fit Native aesthetics. Moreover, contrary to the OIA’s intentions, music strengthened inter-tribal bonds and served as a reminder of distant loved ones and communities. As the principal of Sisseton Indian School observed, “when the boys take to singing Indian songs in the evening I know it’s time to look out for a lot of runaways” (163). Whether they prematurely emancipated themselves or came home as graduates, Indian youths returning to reservations used dance to reincorporate themselves into their communities.

Indeed, Indian Blues is largely a study of the unforeseen consequences of education in Native communities. Using the Lakota as a case study, Troutman convincingly argues that in the wake of the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre, “off-reservation boarding schools in effect spurred the on-reservation dancing renaissance of the early 20th century” (39). Students returned from boarding schools armed with a better understanding of U.S. culture and well practiced in the art of masking subversion while performing Euro-American expectations of behavior. When OIA officials attempted to enforce a ban on tribal dances, Lakota dancers adopted what Troutman calls the “language of cultural citizenship.” Dancers subverted government agents’ ideas of Americanness by scheduling dances on national holidays and, in at least one instance, dancing in full U.S. flag regalia, literally cloaking themselves and their dances under the aegis of the patriotic symbol. Lakota patriotism was genuine, especially for
those who served during the First World War, and their dances suggest new possibilities for what “Americanness” meant and means.

Troutman draws direct connections between such acts of resistance and the easing of restrictions regarding reservation dancing. However, his larger claim that Native musical practices influenced the broader direction of federal policy, specifically New Deal–era reforms that overturned some of the most destructive assimilationist policies, is more suggestive than it is conclusive. In sum, Troutman argues that decisions within the OIA were swayed by a shift in the cultural zeitgeist toward romanticizing rather than demonizing Indians and by a white American public who increasingly demanded access to Indianness. Troutman’s most compelling insight is that Native Americans contributed to this broader cultural shift by taking advantage of public stages and using music as political discourse, in other words, creating performances of Indianness for white audiences that suited their own ends. This insight, however, is also the most difficult to prove. Yet conclusiveness is not really the point; cultural change is never so straightforward. Instead, what Troutman offers is a way to reconceive U.S. politics. Despite being largely excluded from congress, the courts, or the media, Native Americans were and are a part of U.S. political discourse and fully capable of steering this discourse in their favor.

If Indian Blues has a shortcoming, it is that Troutman’s study feels slightly hermetic, sealed off from the world outside American Indian history. One wonders how the discourses he examines intersects with other assimilationist projects. For instance, Troutman reports that the bandmaster at Carlisle School believed his technique of “softening” Indian students could also Americanize recent European immigrants or impoverished whites, but fails to follow up on this statement’s implications (114). Moreover, while his colleagues in American Indian studies Tiya Miles, David Chang, and Claudio Saunt demonstrate the importance of thinking about racial discourses relationally, Troutman typically limits his analysis of race to a Native/white binary. He skillfully demonstrates how “antimodern primitivism” fueled white support for Native resistance to the dance ban. But despite documenting a number of uneasy, racialized references to jazz by both whites and Native Americans, Troutman fails to explore how this turn to primitivism was set against a jazz-age backdrop in which “modern” was increasingly associated with black music (81). However, a book that does so much can hardly be faulted for its focus. Rather than creating a missed opportunity, Troutman has opened a door to further areas of study.

Native Americans were not alone in confronting assimilative pressures. About an hour’s drive from Sherman Indian Institute, Southern California’s
largest off-reservation boarding school, another effort at assimilation was under way in the ethnically diverse neighborhood of Boyle Heights in East Los Angeles. There, the Neighborhood Music School—a philanthropic organization founded in 1932—sought “solid-Americanization in teaching of music to the underprivileged,” particularly to Mexican American youth (Mojo, 22). From the 1930s through the postwar years, progressive reformers and conservative Mexican American civic organizations alike believed that education offered the best means to integrate Mexican American children into (white) U.S. society.

The school was a godsend for Chicano pupils such as Lionel “Chico” Sesma, Paul Lopez, and Edmundo “Don Tosti” Martinez Tostado, but not because these students desired to dissolve into white culture. Instead, they wanted to build chops and hone the technical skills necessary to play the orchestral and swing music they picked up in high school bands or heard spilling out of downtown clubs like the Zenda Ballroom. These students Americanized themselves, but on their own terms.

Anthony Macías argues in Mexican American Mojo that music enabled self-affirming identities that were both Mexican and American. Mojo is a generational portrait of Mexican Americans in Los Angeles from 1935 to 1968 that draws from more than two dozen oral history interviews, the majority collected by Macías himself, to re-create Los Angeles as Macías’s informants lived, heard, and danced it. In five chapters following the city’s dance scenes from swing to rhythm and blues to Latin jazz and mambo, Macías focuses on the ways this generation used music, dance, and personal style to refashion the cultural and political landscape of Los Angeles and of America at large.

Macías has crafted an ambitious work, one that seeks to expand the geography of Mexican American Los Angeles beyond East L.A., broaden the history of Chicano music to include jazz and classical musicians, and rewrite jazz history to include Chicano musicians such as Anthony Ortega and Paul Lopez. Given these grand ambitions the text can occasionally feel overcrowded, but Macías is nonetheless an engaging writer who spikes his prose with a distinctive lilt evocative of the very L.A. cool he seeks to document.

Importantly, Macías adopts the West African word mojo to signify the “creative power” Mexican Americans deployed in their fight for civil rights and struggles to remake L.A.’s urban politics (290). If Troutman’s Indian Blues neglects the cross-racial connections hinted at in its title, then Mexican American Mojo fully realizes the implications of its name, putting Chicano studies and African American studies together in dialogue. Macías posits that neither Mexican American nor African American culture in postwar Los Angeles can
be properly understood without analyzing how both groups negotiated the city’s racial hierarchy in relation to one another. Mexican Americans, Macías argues, reacted to assimilative pressures by selectively adopting elements of black culture, particularly black fashion and music. When Mexican American pachucos and pachucas embraced the African American zoot suit and made it their own, for instance, these young men and women “represented a different kind of Americanization, one more culturally inclusive than state-sponsored efforts. The pachucos and pachucas had in fact already maneuvered around that very ‘duality of assimilation and succession’” (92). Or, more simply, these Mexican Americans had their “mojo working” (91).

Two musicians, Don Tosti and Lalo Guerrero, provided the sonic analogue to the pachuco’s fusion of African American fashion and Mexican American aesthetics, creating a genre known as pachuco boogie. In songs with titles such as “Chicano Boogie,” Don Tosti coupled the staccato piano phrases of African American boogie woogie with Latin rhythms, smooth jazz scats, and verses sung in caló, the urban slang spoken by pachucos and pachucas. Capitalizing on Tosti’s success, Guerrero recorded a string of pachuco-themed songs and made Mexican Americanized versions of pop hits that replaced staid English lyrics with uproarious Spanish caló. These early fusions of black and Mexican American music presaged Ritchie Valens’s 1958 hit “La Bamba,” a melding of a traditional Mexican wedding song with searing rock ’n’ roll riffs, which in turn influenced the history of mainstream American music. For Macías, the widespread popularity of a song like “La Bamba” is further evidence that assimilation is a two-way process and never total.

Much like Josh Kun, whose influential book Audiotopia also champions L.A.’s diverse music scenes, Macías is interested in music’s ability to create new social spaces that can potentially produce positive social change. In an era of restrictive covenants, xenophobia, and anti-miscegenation laws, music made intercultural exchanges possible among all Angelenos by drawing multiethnic crowds into a common room to dance. This challenge to the city’s racial order promoted what Macías calls a “multicultural urban civility” across Los Angeles.

Macías hears two competing models of civil society in postwar L.A.: “one of multiracial musicians, dancers, and entrepreneurs, the other of white urban elites and law enforcement—played out in multiple music venues, with the public freedom and cultural values of Los Angeles at stake” (18). But if the dance floor offered a more civil alternative to L.A.’s stringent racial hierarchy, civility extended only so far and often evaporated at the exit door. Many
Mexican Americans loved black culture but harbored antiblack prejudices. For instance, Chloe Camerena and her friends danced with black men, but, she asserted, “we did not socialize with them or bring them home with us” (148). Drawing distinctions between themselves and African Americans was a strategy some Mexican Americans deployed to “avoid the racial inferiority imposed on blacks,” and they often leveraged their slightly elevated racial status to their own advantage (101). Don Tosti, the pachuco boogie pioneer, jumped at the opportunity to join the better-paid white musicians’ union because, as he later told Macías, “I had nothing to do with the blacks, man” (42).

Ultimately, Macías offers a pragmatic reading of the racial dynamics in L.A.’s urban dance scenes, one that “acknowledges internal dissension, but still recognizes that people could be bound together by music, dance, car culture, and clothing styles more then they were separated by race and class” (285). Here, he touches upon a point typically overlooked in studies that document only the distinctiveness of a specific ethnic or racial group’s music. As Radano has argued, the qualities that define music, be it black, white, Chicano, or otherwise, often grow out of common cultural ground. Yet the fact that music is racialized—that racial differences are inscribed into and reinforced by sound—tends to conceal such cultural commonality. What Macías has shown, to paraphrase Radano, is that just as music can affirm the separation of races, it also calls those distinctions into question.5

To Paul Lopez, a trumpeter who occasionally played in Hollywood’s upscale nightclubs, the separation between white and Latino was audible. Bands in these nightclubs performed a style of Latin music that jettisoned improvisation and “polyrhythmic density” in favor of a focus on “sugary’ melodies” and “vanilla’ chords” (231). Genres such as the son, rumba, and conga sounded so watered down that the music was described as Latin “lite” (231). But the club’s white patrons seemed to experience something entirely different. The music stimulated deep-seated passions, allowing club-goers to cast off their inhibitions and don exhilarating, new personas. As Lopez recalled, after a cocktail or two (or three) club-goers “liked to get all exotic with that rumba music” (231).

The sweetened, Americanized renditions of Latin music Paul Lopez described falls under the umbrella of the appropriately titled genre “exotica.” With evocative covers featuring distant landscapes and titles such as Ritual of the Savage, exotica albums today are often regarded as relics, the discarded musical detritus of the generation who entered adulthood in the years following World War II. Historically overshadowed by rock and roll and postwar youth culture, few scholarly studies have devoted attention to this kitschy, atmospheric
music for grown-ups. But as Lopez’s account suggests, for its listeners, exotica could be just as riotous and significant as rock. So claims Francesco Adinolfi, a music journalist, radio host, and DJ, who brings a record collector’s passion and encyclopedic knowledge to *Mondo Exotica*, an eclectic catalog of postwar musical exoticism that is part history, part auto-ethnography, and part collector’s guide.

In eighteen chapters, loosely organized around the history and global legacy of exotica and other space-age cultural kitsch, Adinolfi covers everything from biographical sketches of exotica pioneers such as Martin Denny to a history of Western appropriations of the Polynesian Tiki god. Although *Mondo Exotica* is published by Duke University Press, it is more journalistic smorgasbord than rigorous, academic treatise; tellingly, it is not featured alongside *Mexican American Mojo* in Duke’s Refiguring American Music series edited by Radano and Kun. Yet placing Adinolfi’s and Macías’s studies in dialogue provides further insights into the connections between music, race, and assimilation.

As a genre, exotica extracts musical source materials from non-Western cultures and racializes “others” in sound. More than a mere reflection of U.S. postwar global imperialism, exotica was a participant. As Adinolfi observes, Martin Denny’s Americanized renditions of Hawaiian music, particularly in the song “Quiet Village,” contributed to a cultural reimagining of Hawai‘i that allowed the United States to recognize itself geographically, artistically, and politically in the Pacific island chain. Indeed, “Quiet Village” topped the charts the same year Hawai‘i was admitted to the union. However, even in a genre as steeped in racializing discourse as exotica, music can nonetheless subvert racial constructions.

Adinolfi, like Macías, uses music to anchor an exploration of identity formation, but while Macías focuses on a minority group, Adinolfi’s subjects are members of the white middle-class majority. Specifically, he examines the culture of postwar bachelors, a generation of men who benefited from America’s postwar prosperity and began to challenge the social mores of their parents’ generation. College educated through the G.I. bill, these men pursued careers that offered both leisure time and disposable income. Unlike their parents, bachelors delayed marriage and sought personal fulfillment outside of the traditional home. Although this generation is better covered in Barbara Ehrenreich’s *The Hearts of Men*, Adinolfi’s focus on bachelors’ taste in music and fashion is intriguing because of its similarity to Macías’s analysis of Mexican American culture.

Adinolfi argues that bachelors reacted to pressures to conform to mainstream, white cultural norms much like pachucos, cultivating a unique personal style
appropriated from the culture of racial “others.” While pachucos drew primarily from black culture, bachelors’ appropriations were global. In their dress, bachelors rejected a corporate world symbolized by the dreaded gray flannel suit. Instead they adopted “a certain exoticism in their own attire.” Rebellious bachelors donned Hawaiian shirts, “the only piece of clothing truly capable of staving off the threatening wave of gray flannel,” and spent their leisure time in Tiki bars and cocktail lounges, where listening to music that evoked exotic locals heightened their sense of subversion (14).

Music was integral to bachelors’ cultural resistance. Adinolfi writes: “Songs would become a new means of escaping to a different time and space. It was enough to sit in your living room, comfortably sip a cocktail, and travel from one end of the globe to the other with Les Baxter or Martin Denny” (33). As Kun has argued, music creates sonic playgrounds of sound he calls audiotopias, places where individuals can form affinities and affiliations unthinkable in the segregated social spaces in which we typically encounter others. A bachelor’s journey into audiotopia could enable him to imagine an existence free from the social constrictions of the 1950s, to escape from the constraints imposed upon middle-class whiteness. But unlike Mexican Americans or the marginalized subjects of Kun’s book, bachelors explored other identities while also benefiting from the wages of whiteness. Ensnared in bachelor pads and cocktail lounges, in reality bachelors rarely encountered racial or ethnic “others.” When they did, the encounter was on bachelors’ own terms, structured by the unequal power relations embedded in U.S. racial hierarchy—think of Paul Lopez playing anglicized Latin music while inebriated white folks “got all exotic.” As Martin Denny, the prince of exotica music, reported to Adinolfi, “I myself, while cutting a record, would never have thought that by extracting music from its cultural roots I would be offending someone” (2). Denny did not have to think; his privileged social position released him from the obligation.

The line between exoticism and racism is razor thin, especially when exoticized difference enhances the expansion of colonial power. In a chapter titled “Exotic Fragments,” Adinolfi contextualizes the 1950s exotica trend by placing it within a long history of Western musical exoticism. He abl documents instances of cultural appropriation, from seventeenth-century motifs of the Indies to Mozart’s search for musical expressions evocative of “that elusive Turkish flavor” (37). However, these “exotic fragments” are not just symptoms of colonial encounters, as Adinolfi treatment suggests. Rather, they were scenes in which the West was inventing itself, defining itself in opposition to the “others” it exoticized in music and art. By aiding the construction of people as
others, both outside of Europe and within, Western musical exoticism became ingrained in the formation of racial thinking.

The Western/other binary in music is just one iteration of a much broader phenomenon. Because difference is registered in sound and song—signaling divisions between the “self” and the “other”—music articulates and reinforces boundaries between various national, ethnic, and racial communities. Turning U.S. exoticism on its head, Adinolfi devotes the book’s final third to musical exotica in Italy. He observes that “it was the United States that was seen as an exotic and distant world from Italy’s viewpoint, recreated and imagined according to the most typical Italian aural and artistic models” (194). Indeed, the constant appropriation and refashioning of “other” music across genre, race, and nation ultimately confirms the porosity of these divisions.

Yet despite this porosity, we have yet to move beyond racialized conceptions of music. In the December 2008 issue of American Quarterly, nearly a century after Sonneck cautioned against unnecessary “musical miscegenation,” Roshanak Kheshti called attention to New Yorker music critic Sasha Frere-Jones’s controversial use of the same phrase to lament the absence of an audible black influence in indie rock music. Although his use was more in reverence than in censure, Frere-Jones nonetheless occupies a position opposite Sonneck’s on a scale that vacillates between repulsion and attraction to exoticized others. As Kheshti notes, Frere-Jones’s discourse displaces African Americans from their own musical traditions, dictating who can and cannot perform valorized modes of music.6 Again, black music only serves to reinvigorate the “real and pure” music of Euro-Americans.

As these three books show—from tribal dancers draped in American flags on the Pine Ridge reservation, to Mexican American Angelenos grooving to pachuco boogie woogie, to swinging bachelors spinning “Quiet Village” on their hi-fi stereos—there is no such thing as “real and pure” music. However, Sonneck was right about one thing: there is a danger in “musical miscegenation.” It exposes race as a lie. If music helped make race, perhaps focusing on the ways music exposes its constructedness may also contribute to its unmaking.

Notes
2. Ibid., 140.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 143.