

Where are You, Arnold Shultz?

Ron Sakolsky

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Though he never recorded, his spirit hovers over the American musical imagination, whispering his hidden secret worldwide to all those with ears to listen to the interraciality of what is typically portrayed as racially separate.

Receiving his slave name from Revolutionary War veteran and slavemaster Mathias Shultz of the Green River region of western Kentucky, Arnold was the child of the last of his ancestors to have once lived in slavery. He began as a songster playing guitar around the turn of the twentieth century. At this time in isolated mountain communities, those of African-American and European-American descent made music together at square dances, picnics, and other occasions calling for string bands.

Though standards of “racial etiquette” were certainly in effect in these gatherings, one of Shultz’s playing partners was a fiddler by the—name of Pendleton Vandirer, later to be known to bluegrass audiences as Bill Monroe’s “Uncle Pen” as a result of the song of the same name.

As Monroe himself once put it in an interview with James Rooney:

“There’s things in my music, you know, that come from Arnold Shultz—runs that I use in a lot of my music I don’t say that I make them the same way that he could make them, ‘cause he was powerful with it. In following a fiddle piece or a breakdown, he used a pick and he could just run from one chord to another the prettiest you’ve ever heard. There’s no guitar picker today that could do that. I tried to keep in mind a little of it—what I could salvage to use in my music. Then he could play blues and I wanted some blues in my music too, you see.”

We all know that the music industry considers the “Whiteness” of country music as unquestionable. However, Monroe’s association with Shultz calls this assumption into question.

Taking this one step further, the music of Elvis Presley is sometimes acknowledged as being an ingenious or insidious (take your pick) combination of blues and country music into what came to be known as rock ‘n roll, a plateau in the long tradition of American minstrelsy that has now moved beyond the blues to swallow rap and spit up Eminem.

In relation to Elvis, the example which is usually cited in this regard is his first Sun single, with one side a note for note cover of blues-man Arnold “Big Boy” Cruddup’s “That’s All Right Mama,” and the other an updating of “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” originally a bluegrass tune by none other than Bill Monroe.

The style of music on that pivotal recording was, in fact, a combination, not of “white” music on one side and “black” music on the other as consensus reality would have it, but of music that was even, more decidedly African American than was originally imagined by many of the most astute scholarly observers. The side assumed to be exclusively “white” must now be reimagined as the product of interracial cross-pollination via Arnold Schultz.

Rock and roll in its very origins, not to mention recent efforts by the Black Rock Coalition to reevaluate the confirming contributions of African Americans to rock music, is quite simply unthinkable without the presence of African elements within American musical expression, whether those elements were freely offered or callously

appropriated by the dominant European American culture. To acknowledge Arnold Shultz is to see rock, and even bluegrass, as hybrid or creole musics, and in so doing, to turn white supremacist ideas about American music upside down!

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