

Academic Musicology and Its Revolutions

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a review of

Revolutions in American Music: Three Decades that Changed the Country & Its Sounds by Michael Broyles. Norton 2024
in his 1955 book, *America's Music*, Gilbert Chase raised a question that has remained of central concern to academic musicologists in this country ever since: What, exactly, is distinctly American about American music?

As the product of elitist academic institutions, musicology has traditionally been concerned with the study of art music—the musical traditions of elites, centered around courts, churches, and bourgeois parlors. Musicologists who specialize in American music have delighted in the innovations of American art music composers such as Charles Ives, Aaron Copeland, and John Cage. Meanwhile, musicians in this country have periodically transformed the world's musical cultures with radical new sounds such as jazz, rock and roll, and hip hop.

Chase and the specialists in American music who followed him have tried to explain what these different musical traditions share and what they might have to do with the idea of America. There's a nationalistic impulse at work here, and by and large, the answers given to these questions have not changed much since Chase's time.

In America, we're told, highbrow and lowbrow cultures interacted and cross-fertilized in ways that were not possible in the more rigidly hierarchical European cultural centers. These highbrow and lowbrow currents flow through a cultural melting pot, in which European, African, and (to a lesser extent, the story goes) Native American cultures circulate, each contributing certain elements to the mix.

Michael Broyles's new book, *Revolutions in American Music*, fits squarely within this musicological tradition. In contrast to Chase's sweeping history, though, Broyles draws our attention to a few particular genres such as polka, jazz, and avant-garde classical music, in three decades: the 1840s, the 1920s, and the 1950s.

This allows room for concise but richly detailed depictions of some fascinating episodes in American music history. The history of early jazz, for example, the development of commercial country music and blues, as well as the rise of rock and roll in the 1940s and '50s are all treated with the enthusiasm and passion they deserve. These episodes are brought to life with biographical sketches of both well-known and lesser-known but influential figures, and illustrated with extensive quotations from contemporary newspapers and critics.

Broyles's interest in the "revolutions" of the book's title seems to lie exclusively in the metaphorical or aesthetic sense of the term, and the book generally tends towards a bourgeois and elitist perspective.

The reader is warned, for example, of the "virtually uncontrolled" crowds of "rowdy working-class men" who frequented the popular theaters of the 1840s. And the new immigrants who comprised these crowds "came willingly," according to Broyles, "seeking a new life" in America—a fairytale immigrant story that ignores the starvation, war and economic desperation that drove the emigration of Europe's working classes.

Broyles's elitism also colors his approach to music analysis. Throughout the book, white middle-class musicians are described as innovators, deftly taking advantage of new technologies or markets to change the musical "landscape" and shift the prevailing musical culture.

In his discussion on minstrelsy, for example, Broyles explains that the white performers caricaturing Black music and dance were creating a racist mockery. But he fails to see that the enslaved Black men who inspired them

were themselves capable of social critique—that they might have been making fun of their captors’ culture with their exaggerated imitations of bourgeois dandies and ignorant bumpkins.

In another episode, the author provides an extensive analysis of the influential style of the early rock and roll pioneer Johnnie Ray. The Black blues singers who inspired him, however, are credited only with providing “rhythmic groove,” and “the sharp, nasal quality of the blues singer.”

Earlier crooners like Bing Crosby appear as innovators, in this telling, developing new vocal techniques suited to the new technology of the microphone and new middle class tastes. The success of Black blues pioneers like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, however, is attributed to their “rough edges,” “deep, husky voice,” and “authenticity.”

Only white musicians, it seems, are capable of bringing any agency to their craft, while Black musicians’ success can only be attributed to their essential authenticity and innate expressive capacities.

This bias is most glaring in Broyles’s treatment of the jazz trumpeter and singer Louis Armstrong. Armstrong’s radical innovations are reduced by Broyles to his “powerful” sound and “organically” developed solos based on his “African roots.” It makes sense to look for African influences in this music, but framing it this way makes these African influences seem somehow organic or natural, and Armstrong’s virtuosic genius is reduced to an ill-defined racial essence.

What’s lost here is the ability to reckon with Armstrong’s artistry, resulting in a disappointingly shallow assessment of one of the most groundbreaking and influential musicians of all time. Armstrong, in fact, studied opera arias and performed classical music with enthusiasm and expertise. His style represented a radical departure from what came before for the way he integrated complex late-romantic harmonies with a virtuosic technique, groundbreaking rhythmic sense, and keen sense for thematic development.

Some readers may find the academic jargon unhelpful. Concepts like “ultramodernism” and “chaos theory,” serve to confuse this story, in this reviewer’s opinion, more than they help to explain it. They may be better served by Chase’s readable and lively classic.

Readers with some interest in academic musicology will probably be confounded by the sparse citations and recycling of other scholars’ research. They may find more value in the work of researchers that have undertaken more critical analysis of the topics that Broyles treats here in only a cursory manner: Eric Lott’s influential study of blackface minstrelsy, for example, or Brian Harker’s work on Louis Armstrong.

Anarchists interested in the history of music in the United States and its connections with oppression, revolution, and liberation will have to look elsewhere, and a comprehensive account of the history of music in anarchist political movements will probably be welcome by many readers of this magazine. In the meantime, Ruud Noys’ survey of anarchist musical currents and DIY scenes, *What is Anarchism in Music?*, and Daniel O’Guérin’s collection, *Anarchism in Music*, offer invaluable forays into anarchist music history.

We will have to await the development of a more comprehensive anarchist musicology capable of bringing an anti-authoritarian libertarian perspective to the rich and multi-faceted history of American music.

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