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Blues People: Negro Music In White America



Synopsis

"The path the slave took to 'citizenship' is what I want to look at. And I make my analogy through the slave citizen's music -- through the music that is most closely associated with him: blues and a later, but parallel development, jazz... [If] the Negro represents, or is symbolic of, something in and about the nature of American culture, this certainly should be revealed by his characteristic music." So says Amiri Baraka in the Introduction to *Blues People*, his classic work on the place of jazz and blues in American social, musical, economic, and cultural history. From the music of African slaves in the United States through the music scene of the 1960's, Baraka traces the influence of what he calls "negro music" on white America -- not only in the context of music and pop culture but also in terms of the values and perspectives passed on through the music. In tracing the music, he brilliantly illuminates the influence of African Americans on American culture and history.

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Customer Reviews

While I have major reservations about a lot of Amiri Baraka's ideas and statements as expressed in his poetry and elsewhere, I have to acknowledge that *Blues People* is mostly excellent. It's not really a musical history of the jazz/blues, so anyone looking for lots of discussion of musical theory and the compositional development of those styles will probably need to look elsewhere. What it is, is a social history of how black music both responded to and developed in relation to black culture and black self-perception from a time of bondage into an era where there was a nascent black middle class. Baraka's perspective is necessarily insular and dated, he's not interested in ideas of cross

cultural assimilation/appropriation or multicultural influences (which to be honest, are concepts that didn't really fully develop in these kinds of analysis until decades after this was written). He is only interested in black people as they relate to themselves and as their music relates to them. Of course it's more or less common knowledge now that rock and roll and by extension almost all popular music in America is traced right back to the blues and the R&B that came out of it, but this is one of the books that took the trouble to really exhaustively point out that connection and to trace back its genealogy. Beyond this, Baraka points out one of the most salient points of cultural musical analysis: a form or style is invented, disseminated, popularized, then at some point people get sick of it and change it into something new. That's a HUGE, brilliant observation. And with regards to popular music, it's not a huge over-generalization to say that the people who are usually responsible for those transformations are almost always black.

The other day a friend rashly claimed that art and music were equally hard to describe in words. I asked him to tell me about a certain painting of Picasso's. He did, but claimed it wasn't accurate. "OK," I said, "you're right, but now tell me about Mozart's Jupiter Symphony." He opened his mouth, closed it, looked at me, and said, "Yeah, I see what you mean." Writing a book about the blues would be equally hard, it seems to me. So, LeRoi Jones did what he could, back in 1963, to tie the indescribable to the more concrete. He wrote a social history of African-Americans in the USA through the prism of music or---maybe on the principle of red and yellow tile floors (are they red with yellow designs or yellow with red designs ?)---he wrote a book on African-American music through the prism of social history. It is one of the most important books on American music (and American society) that you can find. It has stood the test of time. He begins from the Africans who came to North America as slaves bearing very different cultures, confronted by an absolutely different view of the world emanating from their new masters. Here he tries to show how African music became transformed into African-AMERICAN music and then American. He continues then up through the generations of slavery, to Emancipation, migration to the cities, World War I, the Depression, World War II and the bebop age of the Fifties. The book is pre-Civil Rights movement, pre-Martin Luther King. Jones may have looked down on the NAACP and its allies as "white liberal supported organizations", I'm not sure, but they don't appear. The times are symbolized by the use of "Negro" throughout. I agree, the tome is dated, but don't reject it, don't pooh-pooh the man. This is a very intelligent, very worthwhile book.

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