

Introduction

WHO HEARS HERE NOW?

The question posed by the late musicologist Christopher Small, “Why are these people making this music at this time and in this place?,” provided a way to open many of my courses and a number of research projects.¹ I love it because it gave me an easy way to investigate how people make meaning of the musics they made and heard. The four-part equation—people, music, time, and place—covers a lot of territory. Indeed, the identities of musicians, audiences, and critics, the structure and syntax of organized sound, and the historical and geographic contexts of music rarely failed to spur stimulation and provocation.

I’m engaging Small’s question once again as I introduce this selection of my writings. Why *did* I write these essays at this or that time and place? How do I make sense of pieces that were written in varied circumstances and times and shaped, as they are, by diverse motivations? Is there some value in suggesting that they have some kind of unity and to anthologize them as such?

I believe that writing (and any act of creating) is “about” self-fashioning. While it certainly encompasses other things, the establishment of Self in writing is always present—even if it’s done under the category “objective scholarship.” Thus, these essays document, among other things, my

dynamic and changing relationship to various topics over the years; I never thought of myself as a writer standing still in a single theoretical or methodological orbit. I'm collecting my "Selves" and these engagements with assorted topics to represent, I hope, a cohesive body of work.

If there's a prominent organizing theme in my writing, it would be my belief in the strength, resilience, and dignity of Black people, who have fought adversities for centuries. I wanted to tell our musical stories and truths. I desired to reveal the lies and misunderstandings, too. I've worked to understand and explain the histories and mysteries of this thing called Black music, something that has been a powerful, energetic, and magnetic force in my life from my earliest recollections.

The politics of writing and lecturing in the academic guild was powerfully addressed by the late filmmaker Marlon Riggs in an essay resembling an extended poem written in the third person. In "Unleash the Queen," Riggs critiques what happens when "Others/Minorities" adopt what he called "dominant discourses" to validate themselves as intellectuals.² He wondered if, by participating in those language communities, they were "singing someone else's tune to be heard."³ While Riggs was speaking from the perspective of a Black/queer identity in the 1990s, his thoughts resonate across time and category. Riggs asks the guild, "My mouth moves, but you hear your own words. What nature of ventriloquism is this?"⁴ Did the use of specific kinds of academic language—another tongue, if you will—leave Riggs, in effect, voiceless?

The prospect of invisibility/voicelessness and the perception of "cultural illiteracy" all informed how I eventually came to understand the politics of the guild's words, grammars, writing formats, and theories in the context of my own musical background. During my early years in the field, I realized that the academy was just one (and not the most important) of the many "ways of knowing" I had experienced in my musical life. Some of the academy was unbelievably enlightening and motivating. Other aspects of my training and research journey to become a recognized expert in the field alienated me. Had I been "Negro miseducated," to coin a phrase, or were my citations, references, and stories just different? And did/could they have some benefit to music studies?

I became a writer because I wanted to be a scholar—not because I had a strong drive to write from an early age (as I did to create music). Yet tell-

ing stories has been particularly important as I have established a writerly voice in research. As scholar Katherine McKittrick sees it, stories, citations, and references announce one's intellectual history. They also show how we collect ideas, how we know what we know, and what ideas outside ourselves we've adopted to develop a personal, critical voice.⁵

When I wrote the essay from which this book takes its title, I was compelled to make some elbow room for *all* of what I (we) knew to be my (our) intellectual, political, and musical foundations. I wanted to make room for the other experiences I'd lived through. There were, I realized, other stories to tell as I became the "who" in the title.

"Stories," McKittrick writes, can "move us and make place." Clearly, in many of these essays, making place for myself (and others like me) was a central goal. At the same time, as a Black scholar in a nondiverse discipline that had begun to open its gates to multiculturalism, I wanted more. Given the dearth of Black scholars at that time, how could I abide what could only be called antiblackness even as the field increasingly allowed Black musical topics into its array of "legitimate" research topics?

More than creating place for my own voice in the field, the query "who hears here?" invites us all to consider our backgrounds and identifications when writing about a music tradition in which power relationships have been a persistent underlying theme. Riggs expressed my attitude toward the field concisely: "Do you honestly think you can so closely . . . [and] critically examine me without studying or revealing yourself?"⁶

Beyond "outing" and disrupting "the invisible white, critical I," the essays in this collection also document my search for musical meaning via my musicological training and through the other disciplines I engaged. Some of the latter include the other subdisciplines of music theory and ethnomusicology. Add to these Black cultural studies, literary studies, and American studies frameworks. Beyond producing powerful ideas, these other nonmusic disciplines had a much more diverse constituency and provided opportunities for a broader range of insights. Yet over the last thirty years I've witnessed a changing ethos in musicology, and some of that shifting intellectual terrain can be seen in these essays.

Three main impulses run through this work: historiography, cultural criticism, and genre studies. My fascination with historiography—the history of writing history—began with the example set by my advisor and

mentor, the eminent musicologist of American music Richard Crawford. His brilliant historiographical ruminations instilled in me a respect for what could be learned from studying the contours, twists, and turns of historical writings. Indeed, asking “Why are these people *writing* music history at this time, in this place?” allowed me to grasp and organize the ideologies of historical writers.⁷

Cultural criticism, the activity that tries to uncover the often-cloaked motivations animating historical and contemporary actors—as well as the rippling, unintentional social impact of the things they do—is an underlying methodological approach of some of the essays. The challenge for my generation of music scholars was to talk about how sound organization itself—how the pitches, rhythms, timbres, harmonies, and so on—could purvey social meanings. As musicologist Susan McClary put it, cultural criticism in music allows us to “investigate the syntactical conventions that grant coherence to our repertoires and also to examine the ways music participates in the social construction of subjectivity, gender, desire, ethnicity, the body, and so on.”⁸

At that time, some scholars were pushing musicology to broaden the demographics of its rank and file (more on this later), a challenge that has historically vexed the field. Part of my work, as I understood it through the years, was to think about what impact cultural criticism could have on Black music study if the field remained a predominantly white, male endeavor. In other words, what were the implications of achieving a diversity of thought without a diversity of thinkers doing that work?

As a musician I’ve participated in a wide swath of music, from standard chorale literature to gospel and more. Although I wrote a dissertation on jazz pianist Bud Powell, I’ve always considered the full range of contemporary and historical African American music my scholarly domain. I argue in some of these essays that the genres of jazz, gospel, hip-hop, and others have established “social contracts” with audiences—agreements that have created expectations of sonic organization, of audience reaction, and in marketing strategies. My goal in this work (as it was for many music scholars) was simple: to explain how social meaning is derived from the sonic details and assorted reception contexts.⁹

Now I’d like to “storify” the provocation “who hears here?” and Riggs’s metaphor “singing someone else’s tune.” If these essays mark different points

in my scholarly self-fashioning, I should say what led me to the field in the first place. What musical and political selves arrived at musicology's door?

The whole thing seems like an accident.

"Jesus, Lover of My Soul," "Jesus Wants You for a Sunbeam," "God Gave Me a Song," "Oh, Happy Day." These were the first songs I remember rehearsing as part of the tiny-tot and youth choirs of the church I attended in my youth. Rehearsals were taken very seriously in this setting, a small church founded by southern migrants living in the greater Chicagoland region. The migrants brought things from the South—memories and ways of doing—that they insisted on passing on to the next generation. Music was one of them.

In the mid-1960s our elementary school teachers, many of them Black migrants, taught us spirituals and blues together with lessons in math and geography. (Yes, there were pianos in the classrooms.) Our middle school cheerleaders led a cheer in twelve-bar blues form, "Don't Say Nothing Bad about the Spirit" at every home basketball game. We experienced a social world saturated in symbolic cultural forms—at midnight roller rink sessions, at midnight church musicals, in local college gospel choirs and jazz ensembles, and more. They "made" us; it's who we were at that time, in that place.¹⁰

In the mid-1970s my musical interests exploded when I attended the racially integrated township high school, which gave me more opportunities to think abstractly about music as I attended music theory classes, sang madrigals and choral literature, learned the repertoire of the American musical theater, and performed in the jazz band. Somehow this all seemed additive to me and not a challenge to my previous musical literacies. Along the way I jammed on rock and jazz with talented high school friends in living rooms and garages. I began to think of myself as a serious musician.

But there were other literacies to encounter and explore. When I discovered the ML 3556 section of the library (the one focused on Black music history) as an undergraduate in the mid-1980s, it took me by surprise how much I loved the literature about Black music of the United States. As a working musician since I graduated high school and an unlikely candidate to become a scholar, I matriculated at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago in 1981 primarily because the jazz band was

hot and I could gig in the city and attend college simultaneously. The band was directed by Aaron Horne, a clarinetist specializing in modernist concert music. He was the first Black “doctor of music” I’d ever met. Doc, as we affectionately called him, was on a mission to see that musicians like me got an opportunity to study and earn degrees. He recruited great players from around the country. I was in luck: the band needed a piano player. And the opportunity changed the course of my life, steering me toward a land called Academia.

“I have to type a paper,” I remember telling another student. She happened to be an accomplished pianist for the Black Heritage Gospel Choir on campus, a group that was formed to provide a social network to its participants. While I put a little jazz into my gospel accompaniment, she described herself as “just a hymnal girl.” I was in a panic, and she showed me patience and mercy, teaching me how to load the paper into the typewriter and a few other basics necessary to operate a machine I’d never touched with any seriousness. Another beginning began. I don’t recall the topic of my paper, but from that point on putting words on a page didn’t intimidate me. The finished product, in fact, reminded me of making a recording. Writing was permanent, memorializing a moment in time.

Along the way I encountered books by LeRoi Jones (aka Amiri Baraka), Charlie Keil, Eileen Southern, Dena Epstein, and others—all writers I would get to meet in the next decade. Venturing further into this fascinating world of letters, I learned about academic journals that featured articles by scholars who had become my role models: Portia K. Maultsby, Samuel A. Floyd Jr., Josephine Wright, and Olly Wilson, among others, who laid the foundation for Black music research’s contemporary era.¹¹

I’ll never forget a black-and-white photograph of Maultsby that accompanied one of her articles. She was crowned with a voluminous, perfectly shaped 1970s-era Afro that reminded me of Angela Davis’s iconic style. Plus, the article was immensely pertinent to what I wanted to study. I think that photo was at least one of the reasons I decided that a career in music scholarship might be an option for me. It wasn’t just the hair, of course, though that helped. It was, more specifically, about the entire message she sent. For me, it was a “welcome” sign.¹²

Who was writing those works and what they were talking about allowed me to think about possibilities beyond transcribing Dexter Gordon solos

and my youthful dreams of playing like Oscar Peterson. Could there be a rewarding musical life beyond the gig, beyond trying to play fast rhythm changes and the soulful blues of my Southside of Chicago tribe?

Like many of the striving, hopeful young musicians in my crew, I naïvely and arrogantly thought that “Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach.” Now, in the autumn of our careers, we’ve all (predictably) spent time teaching, some more than others. In fact, I’ve taught in some form or fashion for more than three decades. I often advise young musicians to craft a life that will support your art and not to put the pressure on your art to support your life. I’ve learned, in fact, that teaching can be an important extension of an art practice and certainly a powerful form of activism. Writing can do the same; it would ultimately become one of my primary pedagogical tools and a way to stay musical.

I learned that representation and being “seen” mattered when I met Samuel A. Floyd Jr. (1937–2016), the genius activist and organizer who founded the Center for Black Music Research, an institution that at the height of its influence “Blackened” (and strengthened) American music scholarship. As I pursued my degrees in music, his name surfaced constantly in Black music literature. It turned out that he also lived in Chicago, which made it easy for me to show up to his office one day unannounced. I’m embarrassed that I didn’t know better, but after reading some of his work I felt compelled to meet with him. Sam was a tall, gracious gent with a quiet swag. When we met he was surrounded by books, and my first impression was that he looked like the most learned musician I’d ever seen. And his avuncular attitude toward me felt very much like that of the migrants who had raised and nurtured me.

Sam eventually extended an invitation to work on a research project for the Center that would fulfill a course requirement in my Masters of Music Education program. At the time I was the typical hustling musician, using all of the literacies and skills I had acquired to that point to make a living. I was also teaching general and choral music, giving door-to-door piano lessons, teaching workshops at a community conservatory, and gigging in churches and nightclubs.

It turned out that Sam had a plan. He strongly suggested that I drop the gigging life and think about becoming a music historian. And he knew where I should study. I took the bait, went through the application

process, and moved a very young family of five to Ann Arbor, Michigan. It was a gamble for everyone involved.

One of the first things I learned at the University of Michigan's storied School of Music is that my extensive naiveté hadn't expired. The first shock was that Richard Crawford, the preeminent scholar of American music who would become my strongest mentor and guide in the field, wasn't African American. We had only spoken by phone, and Google didn't exist. I wondered why Sam would recommend with such confidence that I study with him if he weren't Black? I called Sam. He assured me through a chuckle that his good friend Rich would be the ideal advisor. He was, of course, right: Rich, who had a number of impressive advisees working on jazz topics, guided me through meeting the high standards of the program. And, what's more, I learned that if I were successful, I would probably be the first Black person to earn a PhD in music history from the institution since nobody could remember any previous ones. No pressure.

There was a lot to learn. One big lesson was appreciating how the field perceived the distance between being a performer and being a contributor to the world of ideas *about* music. Some of my musician acquaintances from back home believed I'd officially elected the "teach and can't do" path. And, from the scholarly side, I experienced the belief that if someone continued to perform they must lack the commitment to become a serious scholar. This was the accepted wisdom at that time, or so it seemed to me.

In the early 1990s, many new ideas were changing the field of musicology as they had reshaped other humanistic disciplines. The turn was branded the "new musicology." Calls sounded at conferences and in publications for the field to become more inclusive in the topics it sanctioned, more open to methodologies from other disciplines, and better attuned to *whose* ideas were heard and valued. A more direct way to put it: scholars began to confront head-on the whiteness, Eurocentrism, and phallocentrism of the American musicology project. It seemed I had arrived on the doorstep of musicology at just the right time.

It never occurred to me that I had the luxury of participating in this conversation solely under the guise of "scholarly objectivity," even though it was at times a cantankerous, high-stakes, and public debate. I put skin in the game, so to speak, when I began to think about how identity

informed my analytical conclusions. Anxieties surrounding this new musicology was intense. It felt like a cultural war.

It was at this time that I met the influential scholars Robin D. G. Kelley and Farah Jasmine Griffin. Kelley was teaching at the University of Michigan and, in my view, symbolized all the promise of this moment in Black studies. He was prolific, trained as a historian, and wrote about labor, politics, and culture. When he agreed to be an advisor on my dissertation on pianist Bud Powell, he asked, after viewing some of my initial work, “So, what’s your argument?” I’m sure I responded with an expression like a deer in the headlights, which is seared in my memory, but his challenge turned my writing in a new direction: I wanted to make specific kinds of arguments about the facts of Black music history. Kelley’s style, expansive musical literacies (from bebop to hip-hop), political focus, and integrity had a tremendous impact on my work.¹³

Griffin and I were fellows at Harvard’s DuBois Institute when we formed a writing group with Daphne Brooks, Bill Lowe, and Salim Washington. Griffin’s fascinating and groundbreaking work on migration narratives in Black expressive culture cut across multiple texts and media—print, visual, and sonic—and inspired me to make connections outside of musicology.¹⁴ If Kelley’s and Griffin’s work provided me up-close examples of how to weave around disciplinary gatekeeping, an audacious publication would do the same for the entire academy.

Black Popular Culture (1992), edited by Gina Dent, was a beacon to many.¹⁵ As I was working through my first major scholarly assignment—an MA historiographical essay on gospel music—this book of essays and discussions appeared to much fanfare. It seemed like every young Black academic I knew dropped everything to read it. The book grew from a conference, whose thirty participants included scholars, journalists, art historians, filmmakers, activists, literary scholars, and more. I learned about an entire community of Black thinkers working on integrating diffuse materials, theories, and art making. It was a multimodal, intergenerational, vernacular, theoretical, aesthetically varied, and politically focused project. Knowing about this work and all the insurrections it was attempting to make compelled me to ask, “Guess who’s coming to the musicology seminar table?”

No musicologists were included in the landmark *Black Popular Culture*, a fact that wasn’t lost on me at the time. Bridging this chasm between

Black cultural studies and musicology has been one of the priorities of my writing through the years, especially as I became more seasoned. The same year that *Black Popular Culture* appeared, Greg Tate's bombshell book *Flyboy in the Buttermilk* was published; Cornel West's *Race Matters* (1993) and Tricia Rose's *Black Noise* (1994) followed.¹⁶ All three of these monumental contributions showed that there was an audience for smart yet accessible Black cultural studies beyond the college classroom. Around this time I also encountered Samuel Floyd's 1991 article on the ring shout, a compelling study that forecasted the use of literary and cultural theory in both jazz studies and popular music studies.¹⁷ I was also part of a cadre of scholars at the University of Michigan who wrote dissertations on (male) jazz musicians.¹⁸ And ethnomusicologist Judith Becker's seminars were particularly eye-opening and provided me many opportunities for intellectual adventure. This was an exciting time for the music disciplines to begin to legitimate the study of all Black music styles on an unprecedented scale.

After publishing the essay "Who Hears Here" in 2001, I began my first book, *Race Music* (2003), with a musical memoir recounting some early experiences within community theaters. One of the things I wanted to establish was how the extended community into which I was born and raised had imprinted my aesthetic sensibilities, and, by extension, the scholarly questions I pursued.¹⁹ My ears heard through the migrant culture I knew as a young person. The institutional terrain—the storefront churches, cathedrals, barber and beauty shops, political machines, sporting cultures, print mass media, radio programming, parades, and radical bookstores—birthed ideologies from traditional notions of uplift to unapologetic militancy. I wanted to drag all of that "who" with me to graduate study and ultimately into my scholarship by adding this "song" to my musicology toolbox.

Not everyone was pleased. As I explored my musicological voice, I began to hear whispers through the scholarly grapevine and in some written responses that I was claiming I could speak about African American music with more authority simply *because* I was Black *and* working on African American music. I didn't agree and interpreted this critique to mean musicology should be new but not *this* new or new in *this* way. Authority and authenticity were battlegrounds.

The “here” in “who hears here?” can stand as a metaphor for the world I encountered in the ML 3556 call numbers. It can also represent the living created in the community theaters. And “here” in these spaces is not always about safety and nurturing; the idea can also acknowledge the negative impacts of power and subjugation. I heard a story in childhood, for example, that informed my notion of home. Back in the late 1960s there was a “Black” bookstore near my home. It was lined with literature, incense, posters, and the ubiquitous colors of “Black liberation”—red, black, and green. Some comrades and I were directed to a wall splayed with maps of our surrounding neighborhood. The intense twenty-something young man with a “statement” Afro directing our tour told his young and rapt audience that “the Man’s” plan to extend Interstate 57 through our neighborhood was a ploy to be able to contain us with military force when “the revolution” finally came. With incredulity I told this story to a colleague who studies these things. She said that the ominous plan was at least part of the reason for that highway.²⁰ Apparently this convenience could also easily bring containment.

Looking back, I guess I’ve been looking for the possibilities between the call numbers and the highway. I wanted to be a musicologist who combined intellectual life as a reader and researcher, my background in performance, and the cultural literacies I learned within the primarily segregated world of my birth. These essays demonstrate this desire. They give witness as well to how I sought to participate in “project musicology” in ways that would push the field as well as make place in other disciplines in which music was being analyzed and where diversity was more apparent.

In 1998 I began teaching at the University of Pennsylvania in the city where the descendants of Du Bois’s “Philadelphia Negroes” comprised a large percentage of the population. Coming to town as a musicologist to work in a highly respected music department could have been an excuse to loosen my ties to these cultural communities. Penn-based musicologists like Gary Tomlinson and Jeffrey Kallberg were mavericks in advancing knowledge in the field. With their provocative insights and analyses, they had a strong impact on my thinking and, frankly, my courage. Fortunately for me, Black Philadelphia—unlike the city of Boston, where I wrote a couple of these essays while teaching at Tufts University—was a place that rivaled Chicago in its demographic and cultural composition and even as

a site of ethnographic study.²¹ It was rich with Black music traditions. I'd found another "here."

Shortly after arriving I was taken to Natalie's Showcase Lounge, a dive bar situated on the western edge of Penn's urban, protected campus. It was right off 40th Street, which was then recognized as the dividing line between Black West Philly and the fortress campus. Inside the long and narrow nightclub I found yet another community theater, one that took pride in continuing Philly's hard bop, gospel-tinged jazz scene, complete with an informed, let-the-good-times-roll *listening* audience that stood as guardians of their deeply rooted traditions. I found myself in a great house band led by drummer Lucky Thompson.

The bully pulpit of Penn's historic music department with its rigorous traditions of musicology, theory, ethnomusicology, and composition, anchored as it is in one of the most vibrant centers of jazz, gospel, R&B, neo-soul, and hip-hop, was a great place to be "here"—between the call numbers and the highways. I had the best of both worlds. Even my latest adopted home, Brooklyn, New York—the "here" from which I wrote some of this work—allowed me to stay centered. When I walked through the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn I was always struck by the mosaic of Black musical styles that saturated the public sphere, shaking windowpanes and setting off finicky car alarms.

These writings show, among other things, my participation in the ongoing institutionalization of Black music research over the past thirty years. I began this journey at a moment when the American Musicological Society was forced—by the initiatives of an interracial group of scholars—to confront its exclusionary practices. When the AMS's Committee on Cultural Diversity was formed and began its work to counter sexism and racism in the early 1990s, "women, people of color, and other minoritized members were mostly absent from the organization's power structure, including both its elected leaders and awardees of prizes and fellowships," as pointed out by scholar Carol Oja in her reflection looking back on that moment in the professional society's history.²²

On the one hand, one could suggest that my career and other indicators demonstrate that inroads have been made regarding musicology's problematic racial history. On the other hand, urgent ongoing calls for equity and fair practices in the field have been instigated by social media hash-

tags like #AMSSoWhite and highlight the need for more action. Other music disciplines have exploded with similar awkward moments in their racial reckonings. The essays in this book were written in the days before social media up until the present era of activism such as Black Lives Matter, #metoo, #sayhername, and recent efforts to decolonize the music curriculum. (I should add here that I've haven't changed the capitalization of the descriptor "black" in the early essays, as this was the custom at the time they were written.)

These essays carry resonances of the conversations I've had in bars and hotel rooms during professional conferences, in the deliberations published in the pages of journals and blogs, and in the firestorms that occur on Twitter feeds. At the same time, this work primarily documents my engagement with the joys that music making and listening inspire—together with my insistence on the undeniable place Black music holds in global cultures. At a moment when more voices are becoming "unleashed" and adding their songs and stories to the shape of music history, I'm pleased to offer my various takes on the musicians, styles, and topics that have held me spellbound for more than three decades. I hope you find something of value in what follows: the work of an accidental musicologist who wanted to know, among other things, who was doing the hearing, the making, and the explaining.