

Music and Culture: Beyond Identity

Alex Lubet

Center for German & European Studies

July 16, 2007

Greetings! It is a pleasure to be here. There appears to be something in the by-laws of the Center for German & European Studies that mandates that I speak at a majority of its events, despite my being neither German, European, nor particularly centered. All kidding aside though, for at least the next sentence or two, my work at the university is also only tangentially related to the mission of the center. For what I am about to say though and for the purposes of this conference, not precisely fitting in seems ideal.

Gatherings of this center, regardless of their respective themes, are extraordinary events. I'll devote myself here to explaining why I believe these meetings matter so much, though I will do so in a most circuitous manner, which is to say starting from the periphery and working my way toward to the center. In doing so, I will ask that you determine the truth of what one colleague – who claims to like me – has stated: that I have attained my full professorship only by being mildly amusing – if that – while apparently making and being capable of making no other scholarly contribution whatever.

He's probably right. The lack of discipline in any form that my friend has observed on my part is coupled with a total paucity of organizational acumen. For that reason, I'll begin my talk with a story that will seem far removed from anything we're doing here.

As background, you need to know that my family combines Jewish and Japanese heritage. Both cultures loom large in much of what we do, but that often matters little in terms of how others respond when any or all of us put in an appearance. In the US, where race – whatever that is -- tends to matter a great deal, I am typically regarded simply as “white,” my wife as “Asian,” our two children as perhaps a bit mysterious, although neither of them seem to feel that way about themselves. The confusion others feel only confuses them.

Our daughter, who graduated from college this year with a degree in English literature, is passionate about Shakespeare and even spent her junior year at Oxford, where, much to our chagrin, she also became obsessed with rowing, a so-called sport which, along with Madonna's marriage to Guy Ritchie, are surely among the principal reasons the sun now sets on the British Empire.

Back in Minnesota for her senior year of college, our daughter was asked by her department to serve on a search committee hiring a faculty specialist in post-colonial literature. Alyssa, whose scholarly passion is the aforementioned English High Renaissance and who claims to know little or nothing of the post-colonies, their authors, or their literature, asked me, presuming for some strange reason that my having spent

three decades in academia means I understand the motivations of its citizens, why she was assigned to this hiring committee.

I understood the logic of her question, of course. Serving on such a committee, she felt entirely out of her specialist element and in the wrong intellectual place. But, having lived in this country nearly my entire life and having an intelligent daughter in whose education we had invested the kind of absurdly large sum that is increasingly the norm in this country and that really should provoke yet another conference with smart German colleagues, I couldn't help but think she was kidding by feigning a lack of understanding. This being America, although it may well be true elsewhere as well, a young woman who looks like a nicely-tanned post-colonial is presumed to have post-colonialism as her passion, nay her intellectual destiny, even by her own professors who should certainly know better. Race, it would seem, is regarded in this country as destiny.

Race is also regarded here as largely synonymous with culture. I teach an enormous course in the early history of rock and roll, with 450 students, which CGES Director Dr. Sabine Engel wanted you to know is also required of all nursing students on our Rochester, Minnesota campus, a stone's throw from the renowned Mayo Clinic, where apparently my take on Chuck Berry and the Stones is regarded as fundamental to their developing a capacity for nurturing the sick. I have my doubts, but hey it's a job.

One phenomenon to which I call attention in my arena-sized academic rockfest that is likely not much discussed in other courses of this kind concerns the Brill Building in

New York, which in the 1950's and early 60's was a major center of songwriting and record production. Its creative staff included the team of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, whose output includes 25 songs composed for Elvis Presley. Many other artists of comparable importance worked there as well. Without exception, every Brill Building writer and producer, including many women, was Jewish. But only one of their stable of singers was Jewish, Neil Sedaka, a Sephardic Jew who was surely, by virtue of his name, thought by his fans to be Italian or otherwise Latin. Most of the Brill Building singers, including famed vocal groups like the Shirelles and the Drifters, were African-American.

This cultural phenomenon strikes me as extraordinary, extremely interesting and certainly worthy of consideration in an academic course in American popular culture. The magnitude and nature of the Jewish contribution to rock and roll is hardly acknowledged and thus certainly not well understood. When I ask my students to speculate upon this, I am sometimes surprised at their responses. I am less concerned that so many are unaware of the depths of ethnic prejudice in the United States in that period which made it impossible to be an openly, obviously Jewish pop singer, than I am taken aback by those who say that the overwhelming Jewish presence in this important center of musical creativity is a mere coincidence and thus of no consequence since, of course, Jews are racially white and after all nothing but race – whatever that is – matters.

I can't honestly say that I'm completely able to account for the Brill Building phenomenon myself, but I wish I could and would certainly regard learning more about it to be a worthy scholarly endeavor. Being Jewish myself surely accounts for part of my

curiosity, but I'd like to think that it's also borne of being a student of comparative cultures. Indeed, 80% of Jewish Studies majors at Minnesota are not Jewish, and have made the same kind of admirable intellectual choice to explore something new and different and perhaps even foreign, as has my Japanese-Jewish Shakespearian daughter.

Regretfully, I doubt such students are common in this country. Rather, I fear that the majority thinks color – and color prejudice – is all there is to culture and that nothing else is really worth knowing. While, for example, I'm confident that anti-Semitism played a role in the Brill Building phenomenon, there are surely many other facets of American Jewish culture that contributed as well. Students and others who only want to know racism – the worst in people – are obviously missing out on much that is vital and -- even better -- fun.

Tonight's musical offering is another case in point. The Clearwater Hot Club, with whom I've worked twice previously at these salons, play a kind of jazz whose historical and cultural significance cannot be overemphasized. While jazz is beyond doubt primarily an African-American cultural outpouring, the first great recognition of jazz and other African-American musics beyond African-America itself came in Europe as early as the 1890's. Europeans, it would seem, were able in this case to transcend color prejudice and appreciate culture in a manner that was impossible for many if not most white Americans at the time. The exodus of black musicians and the richness of European musical life, including some phenomenally original jazz emerging in recent years from Germany and Austria, have continued to this day. Needless to say, I'm not

naïve about Europe's imperfect record on race, which also continues to this day, but the continent has had its moments of great enlightenment and its appreciation of and support for black American music is surely one of them.

The first truly original contribution to jazz to originate in Europe was the Hot Club sound. The innovations were obviously in large part instrumental, the emphasis on strings and the lack of piano or drums, but also in terms of rhythm, tonality, and the nature of group interaction. Some of what was new to jazz in the Hot Club sound came from the mainstream of French popular culture and to a lesser degree European classical music. Some came from the Gypsy heritage of the Hot Club style's greatest artist and innovator, guitarist Django Reinhardt. Those of you were here last year may recall the pleasure I shared with you in thinking about this Gypsy guitarist's relationship to the great German-American medical economist Uwe Reinhardt, a pleasure only mitigated by the fact that it is absolute nonsense. Nonetheless, my remarks and the fact that they were made by a music professor who would only be aware of a medical economist if he were really famous seem to have had some influence insofar as we have been honored with Professor Reinhardt's presence this year. Fortunately, my talk this year includes no remarks about British singer-songwriter Kate Bush and no speculation as to her distant relations, given who might thus show up at next year's conference.

In any case, the Hot Club sound, so-called Gypsy jazz, is a rich and complex phenomenon of a kind that can only happen when people's interests transcend their personal demographics as determined by accidents of birth. Europe became liberatory

for African-Americans. Jazz became revelatory for Europeans, including a guitarist from that continent's historically most despised minority. It is unfortunate that a great deal of American thinking and teaching – as well as thinking by America's enemies -- reduces much of combined American and European society to simply “the West” and fails to appreciate and embrace important differences and distinctions of the sort that inspire conferences of this kind as well as programs like those of CGES. You in attendance are to be congratulated for coming together for the purposes of understanding and transcending differences of culture – medical culture in this case – in the interest of the common good...and free food.

I'll close with an item that bears upon my own most current research. Contrary to what my aforementioned colleague says, I'm not merely mildly amusing. I'm also as capable as the next professorial guy of turning out reams of turgid scholarship for obscure journals that no one can bear to read. Issues that concern music's relationship to health and particularly disability loom large in my work. Thus, I'm not entirely out of place at a conference such as these. Were I you, I'd be concerned.

My current focus is legendary guitarist Les Paul, one of the great musicians and inventors of the 20th century. My particular interest is that he continues to perform into his 90's with a seriously impaired right arm and arthritis that severely limited his finger mobility. His reinvented musicality in light of disability, some of it the result of aging, offers some very important lessons in gerontology, a subject that for some odd reason gets increasingly interesting to me as I age.

However, those lessons are not my topic tonight. In addition to being one of the greatest guitarists of all time, and a Django Reinhardt acolyte who owns and treasures one of the Gypsy master's guitars, Les Paul is a member of the National Inventor's Hall of Fame. His creations include the electric guitar, the sound reverberation unit, and, perhaps most important, multi-track audio recording.

Paul's most famous multi-track recording is likely "How High the Moon," a 1940 composition by Nancy Hamilton and Morgan Lewis, which he recorded in 1951 with his then-wife, vocalist Mary Ford. She sings about a dozen vocal lines, accompanied by Paul playing about ten guitar parts. There is more I could say about this, but it will suffice to observe that the composition is regarded as a standard. (Play)

The chord changes to "How High the Moon" are also standard fare for jazz improvisers who, however, prefer to play as the melodic "head," or introduction, Charlie Parker's 1946 melody, "Ornithology." (Play)

Important differences aside, these two works are in many ways essentially the same composition. Why then did Parker feel compelled to compose a new melody, in essence a variation, particularly since all but the first and last choruses of any performance would be improvised solos. Why not simply use the original "How High the Moon?" theme?

There are any number of reasons Parker and his colleagues might have chosen to begin their performances with a radically recomposed variation on a pop standard rather than that standard itself. Some of them are purely artistic. They include the desire to create new work, the need for a “head” melody that is stylistically more in tune with the improvisational styles of bebop musicians, and the desire to begin with something that sounds improvisatory as a means of casting more emphasis upon improvisation as the heart of jazz. Those are all wonderful reasons to make art in a particular way.

It is also often said that jazz musicians created new “head” melodies based on the harmonies of classic popular songs as a means of both avoiding royalty payments to the original composer and earning royalty payments oneself. There is almost certainly a great deal of truth to this. The one untruth about this that has circulated long and widely is that it is only melodies and not harmonies that may be copyrighted. This is quite simply false. The realities of establishing music copyright are far more complex than that and, like all matters of intellectual property, more complex now than ever. Fortunately, these difficulties are limited to the arts and have not affected medicine, which is blessedly free of intellectual property concerns, doubtless because so little money is at stake.

I have also heard said that when bebop musicians such as Charlie Parker placed new tunes over old chord changes it was intended as a gesture of black militancy, even an expression of racial superiority. There was certainly an element of African-American pride and even nationalism in bebop, but once again the theory just stated fails on the evidence.

Bebop was never exclusively black. There were white players, including some important ones, from the beginning, though they were certainly a minority and presented no threat of wresting the music and the profits from its African-American creators as had largely been the case with the earlier swing style, which focused most of its attention and opportunities on all-white bands.

More important, though, the sort of race hatred implicitly attributed to Parker and others through this assertion simply doesn't jive with the historical record. A much-celebrated Minnesota jazz disc jockey has in his archive a remarkable interview with Parker. In it the saxophonist and composer declares his great admiration for and knowledge of his classical composer contemporaries Bartok and Stravinsky. At the end of his life, he was also planning to study with the innovative French-American composer Edgard Varese. It pains me to feel it necessary to note that the now-famous musicologist whom I had overheard hypothesizing so about Parker's alleged obsession with race was white, her observation part of a sort of globalized Oedipus complex with the entirety of Western culture cast as the father. Fortunately, Charlie Parker did not even remotely share her views.

The point, of course, is that Parker found the exploration of other cultures and the refusal to define himself in essentialist, racial terms to be liberatory to the benefit of jazz and all of American music and culture. In much the same way, those of us who gather to both parse and transcend the differences between national healthcare cultures do so for the

benefit of all concerned. Like Django Reinhardt, Charlie Parker, and my daughter, you understand the difference between ethnicity and destiny and thus the potential of cultural exchange and transformation. If for no reason other than that, you have earned your hot jazz and free food. Thank you.