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Music and Boundaries: Race and Folk

Sourwood Mountain: This is surely a real folk song; its obvious crudity, its simplicity, and above all its swing and go show that. A fellow really needs a supply of “white lightning” to sing or play it. Its rhythm is irresistible. The words cannot be applied to the tune by anybody but a mountaineer.

—Howard Odum Papers, #3157,
fol. 638, Southern Historical Collection,
University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill

No one who knows of the vast amount, seemingly unlimited, of native material, descriptive of the folk, the life, the regional civilization of the Negro can fail to regret its neglect. Here are language, literature, and if poetry be the product of feeling and seeing, then poetry of unusual charm and simplicity. They are part of the story of the race.

—Odum 1925: 8

Though unremarkable to contemporary ears, the claim that “this is surely a real folk song” would have been esoteric, even academically insolent, when penned by sociologist Howard Odum in the early twentieth century. The concept of folk music was little known outside elite universities and antiquarian societies, a European import borrowed by intellectuals to “discover” the national soul in America’s quasi-peasantry. In this quotation can be found the basic contours of a social-musical model that would be later appropriated by the American political left. Unlike the polish of classical music and the cultured class who appreciate it, folk music is considered crude and simple, for crude and simple folk. It is music that belongs in a social context, presumably where “white lightning” flows with the music. It is bodily, deriving its musicality from rhythm more than harmony. And it is “owned” by a group of a particular class and place, the mountaineer. In the second quotation, Odum makes a similar claim about African Americans, finding the essence of the group in their folk music. Though granting their culture the ambiguous status of “regional civilization,” like the mountaineer, blacks are affirmed for their charm and simplicity. Their music is seen as not only a window on their essence but a means of preserving it. Together these two quotations from

a sociological pioneer document the construction of American folk music and suggest why the left might find it fitting to politically appropriate. In contrast to European folk music, which symbolized purportedly homogeneous national groups, American folk music became a vehicle to contest who was part of the American nation. For activists, the “folk” became the cultural equivalent of “the people” and folk music became “the people’s music.” Those who first nurtured the concept of folk meant people of English ancestry. But for later generations, including that of Howard Odum, who published about “Negro” folk songs as early as 1911, those of African ancestry were musically, if not socially, as American as anyone.¹ How the music of southern mountaineers and ex-slaves became defined as “folk” and how qualities of music became associated with qualities of people are the questions asked in this chapter. Answering them helps explain why folk music seemed more appropriate than other genres when the left adopted “the people’s music” as a project.

The concept and ideology of folk music were constructed in a social and musical context that provided the cultural raw material and set the boundaries of plausibility for the genre’s social identity. A genre’s social identity—the attributed qualities of people associated with a genre—does not derive simply from its content but, like all cultural phenomena, should be explained at the level of the social, including the social basis of its inventors and purveyors, the institutions through which it is articulated and diffused, and the relationship between those who made the music and those who mediated it to others. Folk music was invented as a concept and developed as an ideology with specifically nationalist ambitions. Inheriting an image of a peasantry set off from the elite by class and time, but embodying the ethnic and national essence of a people, the original American folk project initially celebrated America’s closest equivalent to the English peasantry but was unable to restrict the concept of folk to the “pure” Americans of English descent. The social realities of American vernacular music could not be contained. The art world of music was, much more than the rest of society, racially inclusive, providing the raw material for a second, racially inclusive folk project in the hands of politically committed activists.

GENRES

From the sexual associations of rock and roll to the high-status aura of opera to the defiant connotations of rap, the meaning of music lies not only in particular sounds or songs but also in the categories by which people understand music, that is, in genres. When discussing the alignment of cultural boundaries and social boundaries, the cultural boundary

most commonly alluded to is genre. Folk music is a genre. To understand how folk music arose, how it developed connotations, how it came to be used by social movements, and how it was consequential for influencing racial boundaries, it is important to consider what a genre is, so to speak, generically. Fabbri (1992) has one of the most complete definitions of genres, specifying them as a set of socially accepted rules including the following:

- Formal and technical rules: musical form, aural characteristics, playing conventions, instruments, rhythm, relationship of words to music. This is the colloquial sense of genre, describing how baroque sounds differ from minimalist or heavy metal from electronica.
- Semiotic rules: rules of communication, how music works as a rhetoric, how meaning is conveyed. Semiotic rules shape how truth or sincerity is indicated musically or how we know what the music is “about.” Peterson’s description of how authenticity was constructed for country and western music through such devices as clothing, instrumentation, and lyrical themes shows that the sociological analysis can explain how semiotic rules work (1997a).
- Behavioral rules governing performance rituals: not only do classical music, jazz, and heavy metal sound very different from each other, but people are expected to behave very differently at their concerts. Such rules apply not just to audiences and performers on-stage but also to behavior in interviews, press photographs, post-performance parties, and so forth.
- Social and ideological rules: different genres invoke different social images of musicians, audiences, and others, regardless of reality. Small, for example, describes the classical music concert as a microcosm of bourgeois respectability (1998). Hebdige uses a similar ethnographic method to show how punks have used their music to defy respectability (1979). It is through social and ideological rules of genre distinctions that racial, ethnic, gender, class, and age identities are mapped onto genres.
- Commercial and juridical rules: different genres are governed by different modes of ownership and financial reward. Much of jazz and classical music has fallen out of copyright and is now in the public domain. Further, there are very different practices for how concerts are organized, how records relate to live events, how performers relate to composers, and so forth.

I would extend the sociological analysis of genres by emphasizing that rules do not float freely but are always expressed and enforced in organizations and institutions. Different genres enmesh different sorts of orga-

nizations and institutions, a point often overlooked when focusing only on commercially produced music. Some of the most robust boundaries demarcate genres embedded in different institutional frameworks. DiMaggio, for example, has described how the distinction between high-brow and lowbrow art arose with the adoption of the nonprofit corporation as the organizational basis of art, music, dance, and other fine arts. When cultural expression can be supported by organizations subsidized by major benefactors, it can be lauded as transcending the vitiating pressure of the market (DiMaggio 1982a).² Conversely, popular music is validated by its broad appeal materialized in the market. Success is signified by gold or platinum records based solely on market success and by the Grammy, bestowed by popularity among intra-genre peers.

The institutional setting of folk music is especially important to the story of this book. Though the ideology around folk music portrays an indigenous social setting, with images of rural folk sitting on front stoops plucking a banjo or strumming a dulcimer, music when labeled folk music has been more typically produced and distributed within academic settings, within specialized folk music settings such as festivals or coffeehouses, and by social movements. Except for the commercially successful folk revival of the 1960s, folk music has been embraced as an alternative to commercial music. Like its classical counterpart on the other end of the aesthetic scale, the genre of folk music was embedded in a set of institutions outside the market that substantiated its claim to purity.

By this reasoning, genres are more than means of classification, more than a set of cognitive categories about cultural objects themselves. Rather than categorizing a set of preexisting songs or works, genres also shape composition, production, and reception. The concept of classification assumes that cultural objects have certain categories that are then ordered according to cognitive schemes. The characteristics of the objects are analytically (and perhaps temporally) prior to the classification. From this perspective, classification is a cognitive map imposed upon reality, as though the reality were there before the classification scheme. Zerubavel, for example, analyzes the logic by which we divide the world, distinguishing between continuous dimensions, mental gaps, mental quantum leaps, and the like (1991). In contrast, the concept of genres, as a set of rules and practices, assumes that divisions are actively constructed, that the consciousness of the categories informs actions that shape the cultural objects themselves. Composers compose, performers perform, and critics interpret according to the reified categories we call genres or aspire to create new rules and practices under the banner of genre labels they are introducing. While some genres are invented to refine the categorization of existing musical styles and practices, at least as often genres are

introduced to validate innovation, not just label. The inventors of rap did not release songs that listeners categorized as rap so much as simultaneously invented the genre and the songs that belong to it. Minimalism, emo, alternative country, and acid jazz refer to new sounds and practices both guided by and constituting new genre labels. Thus genres are projects that people decide to affiliate with and work on behalf of, collectively constructing and/or enforcing standards of practice. A sociology of genres must explain why, how, and with what effects people collectively invent, define, reify, and enforce categorized standards of musical practice. For American folk music, this agenda involves how indigenous southern music in the nineteenth century became crystallized into the styles and practices we call folk. And the social relations of southern culture inevitably involve race.

Music has played a distinctive role in American race relations. The relatively free space of music in slavery, the ambivalent place of blackness in minstrelsy, the use of music by abolitionists to depict slaves' humanity, the remarkable popularity of the black choirs such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers for white audiences, and the dense network of black and white songsters (that would include what we now call street musicians and lounge musicians) add up to an exceptional infusion of black and white society and culture. The syncretic fusion of European and African heritage that emerged as popular music could only happen if blacks and whites interacted more in the world of music than in the rest of society. Even in the nineteenth-century American South, the relationship of race and music was reflexive. Not only did race shape music, but music also helped construct the meaning and operation of race. Southern indigenous music was found in several institutional settings, all of which featured unusually frequent interaction between blacks and whites. This, of course, does not imply that social relations between races were any less oppressive because blacks and whites shared musical experiences. But it does mean that musical influences from both Europe and Africa were blended to create uniquely American styles and character (Levine 1977; McClary 2000; Small 1987; Southern 1983). The syncretism of American popular music has both reinforced and at times destabilized the binary polarization of American race relations. From minstrelsy to spirituals to jazz to rock and rap, racial representation and concrete social interaction have been profound and ambivalent.

Thus, race is the analytic prism through which the genre of American folk music will be examined. From the initial fusion of African and European music under slavery to the reconfiguration of those two lineages in spirituals and minstrelsy to the attempts to purify African influences out of "truly American" music, the history of vernacular music in this country has been pervaded by race.

SLAVERY

During the antebellum period, musical strains from Africa and Europe were fused in several southern institutions. Slave owners used slaves to entertain at dances and parlor socials. Religious events permitted musical interaction. Minstrelsy, despite its often vicious display of racial stereotypes, exposed white audiences to African-influenced music. And socializing among the slaves permitted white musicians to adapt African sounds to European instruments and musical forms.

Just as slave owners used slaves' agrarian and industrial skills, so did they exploit the musical talents the involuntary migrants had brought from home. European observers in Africa had frequently noticed the ubiquity of music and dance. Richard Jobson, an English sea captain, after his exploration of the Gambia River in 1620 wrote, "There is without doubt, no people on the earth more naturally affected to the sound of musicke than these people; which the principall persons do hold as an ornament of their state, so as when we come to see them their musicke will seldome be wanting. . . . Also, if at any time the Kings or principall persons come unto us trading in the River, they will have their musicke playing before them, and will follow in order after their manner, presenting a shew of state" (Southern 1983: 6). Master musicians occupying high status in their societies honed their skills as virtuoso performers sustained by the literature of their people.

In white colonial society, dances were the most popular form of entertainment, held in taverns, meeting halls, and homes. White audiences enjoyed both European-derived and Europeanized African music with slaves playing fiddles and horns as well as banjos and mouth harps. In a society where slaves provided most of the labor and where musicians were considered servants, slaves were trained to provide the music for southern dances. But having learned to play fiddles and horns for the owners, they then would have learned to think musically in diatonic scales and repeated cadences, especially in the generations after removal from Africa, refracting the musical consciousness they imported from home through the new training received in America. Their imported music was further muted by owners fearful of uprising, further fostering the fusion of African and European (Barlow 1989; Krehbiel 1914; Levine 1977; Southern 1983).

Songs played before white audiences also were played in activities of segregated black enclaves such as picnics, barbeques, fish fries, sporting events, holiday parties, and country dances. Especially important were Saturday night social gatherings, a common ritual begun during slavery that continued afterward. Held in homes or outside, and later in "juke

joints,” they featured singing, dancing, frolicking, discussion, and gambling. The fiddle, the only instrument to span the folk-classical spectrum, was the most popular instrument followed by the banjo, though these became less prominent after the war. Many songs like “Little Lisa Jane,” “Chicken in the Birdbath,” and “Old Grey Mare” were of Anglo-American origin. As Barlow notes, “The dance music they played syncretized the folk materials and instrumental techniques from both traditions and was played before both black and white audiences” (1989: 30).

Just as the exposure to European dance music facilitated fusion, so did antebellum religious experience. Slaves had relatively little contact with Christianity in the first century of American slavery when whites debated whether they had souls, but the white evangelists of the Great Awakening in the 1740s and 1750s reached out to them. Henceforth African Americans and Euro-Americans often attended the same religious services, learning traditional hymns and adapting them to their own circumstances. In 1819 John F. Watson, a Methodist, wrote with some alarm about the uncomfortable independence shown by slaves in their religious practice: “From this cause I have known in some camp meetings, from 50 to 60 people crowd into one tent, after the public devotions had closed, and there continue the whole night, singing tune after tune (though with occasional episodes of prayer) scarce one of which were in our hymn books” (Small 1987: 89). Not only were they singing songs not in the hymnals, they were influencing how white southerners were sounding spiritual. The qualities that made white gospel music different from traditional European hymns—the greater emphasis on rhythm, the call-and-response structure, the syncopation, and the energy—were all derived from African influence (Levine 1977; Reagon 1975). The fused music sung by slaves eventually became known as spirituals, which used European forms including verse structures, diatonic scales, monophonic harmonies, and measured beats, especially as sung by those aspiring to middle-class respectability such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers.³

THE SPIRITUAL

Although slaves made music in many social contexts and for many purposes, it is their religious music that became defined in public discourse as the quintessential African American music of the nineteenth century. It was the spiritual that first came to be treated as a separate object (Cruz 1999), the original genre of specifically black music. More important, it was affirmed by both literate African Americans and whites as proof that slaves warranted freedom, as music not just by a race but music of racial distinctiveness. Beginning with Frederick Douglass’s celebrated autobiog-

raphy (1997 [1845]), black religious music expressed the suffering and the humanity of slavery and cried out to the world the desire for freedom. But Douglass notes that it was only freedom that gave him the appreciation of what the music truly meant.

I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. (1997 [1845]: 34)

The book was immensely popular and widely read, its impact as much from its eloquence as its content. That a former slave could be so articulate caused skeptics to question whether a black man had really written it. His own reinterpretation of slave music was mirrored by white abolitionists who came to see that what other whites heard as only noise was in fact an expression of creativity and humanity. Black music became embraced as proof that slaves had the capacity for culture, that most human of traits. In 1849 William Wells Brown, himself a fugitive slave, collected some of the most popular anti-slavery songs in *The Anti-Slavery Harp: A Collection of Songs for Anti-Slavery Meetings*. Most were parodies of well-known songs, predominantly songs from the British Isles, though minstrel songs were not uncommon, for example, “O Susannah,” “Old Rosin the Beau,” and “Dandy Jim” (Southern 1983). As the abolitionist movement developed, the music was increasingly drawn from the slave community itself, though typically modified for white aural sensibilities. But the effect was still significant. As the lyrics of one of the songs from *Anti-Slavery Harp* made explicit, presaging the more famous words of Sojourner Truth,

Am I not a man and brother?
Ought I not, then, to be free?
Sell me not to one another,
Take not thus my liberty.⁴

While the activist music of the *Anti-Slavery Harp* was common in political movements of antebellum America, when adherents sought converts and forged solidarity with spirited odes to political candidates and moral campaigns, the abolitionists increasingly fashioned a new purpose for music. Not only could music be used to express one’s own spirit, but it could be attributed to people whose humanity had been contested. To make a case for emancipation, abolitionists had to demonstrate that

slaves were fully human in order to challenge both bestial popular imagery and scientific classification of species. On the assumption that music is a uniquely human activity, they hoped that by showing that slaves made music (not just sounds), they could authenticate the slaves' humanity. When northern abolitionists brought slave spirituals to the attention of white audiences, slaves were for the first time understood to be fully human, endowed with the quality that sets people apart from other animals—culture.

As abolitionists constructed spirituals to humanize slaves, they unwittingly sowed the seeds to link American folk music to African Americans. Many of the discursive themes around spirituals prefigured later discourse on folk music. Slaves were represented as a folk—people bound to the soil, barricaded from modernity, innocent to the corrosive character of industrial cities and mass culture. For example, Charlotte Forten's personal account of a northern African American teacher who traveled to a liberated region of the South to teach freed slaves was filled with music, from the strains of "John Brown" on her arrival to spirituals when they worshiped and shouts when they worked. Though written for "private perusal," the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* saw fit to publish it in the midst of war (Forten 1864). More explicit about the racial significance of music was *Slave Songs of the United States*, published by former abolitionists shortly after the Civil War. The authors' introduction employed the language of anthropology to depict themselves as collectors of the cultural artifacts from a threatened tribe. The indigenous informants were described as exotic and innocent, but possessing natural cultural talents beyond the abilities of more civilized races. Their gift of culture came not from civilization but from the archaic savagery of slavery: "The wild, sad strains tell, as the sufferers themselves could, of crushed hopes, keen sorrow, and a dull, daily misery, which covered them as hopelessly as the fog from the rice swamps. On the other hand, the words breathe a trusting faith in rest for the future—in 'Canaan's air and happy land,' to which their eyes seem constantly turned" (Allen, Ware, and Garrison 1971: xix). The imagery is rural ("fog from the rice swamps") and pre-secular. From the perspective of the mid-nineteenth century, when prevailing images of the future embraced the progress of civilization, only the innocent or ignorant would keep their eyes turned to "Canaan's air and happy land." The overriding image is quaintness, as in this passage: "One of their customs, often alluded to in the songs . . . is that of wandering through the woods and swamps, when under religious excitement, like the ancient bacchantes. To get religion is with them to 'fin' dat ting'" (xii). The simple act of walking through woods and swamps is raised to a custom. The use of dialect, unnecessary for speakers socially close to the writers, heightens the sense of "otherness." The text, then, though written

decades before anyone discussed the plausibility of American folk music, discussed whether the songs were written by individuals or grew by accretion, concluding that both processes were common.⁵

Cruz explains how the abolitionists not only influenced the prevailing view of African American culture but changed the way we think about the relationship between groups and their culture: “The juncture at which black culture—or what has come to be known as ‘slave culture’—was ‘discovered’ as culture represents a turning point in the rise of modern cultural interpretation. More specifically, this juncture brought the new cultural inquiry into relationship with the racial and cultural margins within American society” (1999: 5). The spirituals were framed for white audiences not only to elicit sympathy for an oppressed people but to extend to slaves and their descendants a new kind of cultural authority—that of authenticity. Instead of a straightforward correspondence between the stature of a group and the respectability of its culture, cultures can be valorized because they are considered humble or common. Cruz calls this stance toward the culture of a subordinate group “ethnosympathy,” by which he means a mode of analysis based on the empathetic understanding of another group’s culture. Music is seen as a reflection of other people’s inner lives, a way for the dominant group to paternalistically feel a common humanity. Slave songs, especially after the writings of Frederick Douglass, were interpreted differently than music had been previously. As Cruz describes it, “When black and white intellectuals began to embrace the new sense of black subjectivity, they forged links between a humanitarian reformist redemption politics of abolitionism and a quest for cultural authenticity” (1999: 6).⁶

Through the ethnosympathetic stance and application of the concept of authenticity as a standard of aesthetics, urban whites forged a contradictory relationship to black (and rural white) culture, humanizing for whites the image of African Americans but implicitly applying a dual standard for aesthetic worth. While music of European lineage was evaluated in terms of influential composers or performers, music of African Americans prior to the jazz age was framed as the expression of a group. Moreover, at a time when whites compartmentalized religious and secular music, those mediating black music to white audiences valorized only religious music, prefiguring the characterization of black music as soul music. James Miller McKim, a founder of the Anti-Slavery Society and operator of the Underground Railroad, addressed the Port Royal Freedmen’s Association in Philadelphia in 1862 regarding his observations of slaves at the South Sea Islands in South Carolina, emphasizing their musical talents. Contributing to the stereotype of African Americans’ inherited sense of rhythm, McKim humanized the slaves by describing how musical they were. Furthermore, he explained, they experienced not just

any music but religious music, and not just any religious music but doleful music—what later generations would find soulful. It seemed important to McKim that when he asked the slaves where they got the songs, they said that they made them up. In contrast to the prevailing assumption that civilized people capture their culture in enduring literature and art, the slaves were seen as capable only of spontaneous spiritual expression. They had music in lieu of literacy. Though human, they were primitive, with culture coming from the heart, not the mind. McKim's publication of his speech and several slave songs in *Dwight's Journal of Music* (Boston, August 9, 1862) articulated what would become the dominant white image of black music for much of the next century: "They are a musical people. When they work in concert, as in rowing or grinding at the mill, their hands keep time to music" (McKim 1862). The music, he noted, is all written in minor modes, all religious, even when sung in secular settings, expressing sorrow, sadness, and melancholy, the only positive sentiment being hope. Perhaps most important, the music is taken to represent the soul of the black race: "I dwell on these songs not as a matter of entertainment but of instruction. They tell the whole story of these people's life and character. There is no need after hearing them, to inquire into the history of the slave's treatment" (1862: 2).

As African Americans sought to develop the human and cultural capital for fuller participation in modern society, they found that whites continued to imagine black music as spirituals. Shortly after the end of the Civil War, the northern white American Missionary Society founded Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. To help raise money, the university sent their choir, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, to northern cities, performing primarily for affluent white audiences. Typical of the nascent black middle class to which most of the students belonged, the choir performed European classical music, inserting a few slave songs arranged along European styles. Like most upwardly mobile groups, students and their teachers shunned the culture of their origins, considering slave music as undignified primitive reminders of servitude. But white audiences responded enthusiastically to the slave songs, embracing them as authentic expressions of a black soul. The Fisk Jubilee Singers became identified with a new genre of American music, the Negro spiritual, bringing them unimagined fame. The construction of the genre crystallized with the explosive popularity of the group. Just four years after the university's founding, a group of nine students, including eight former slaves, toured New York, introduced by the country's most renowned clergyman, Henry Ward Beecher. A year later they sang at the World's Peace Jubilee in Boston, followed by their first European tour, including a performance for Queen Victoria. A host of imitators both on campuses and in the community, the vogue of the term "spiritual," the adoption of aural conven-

tions, the model for ensembles, and the template for performance practices helped popularize the music throughout the country and codify the sound and form we know as the spiritual. Before long spirituals were known more broadly throughout the country than the Anglo-Saxon folk songs studied by Child or Sharp (N. Cohen 1990; Filene 2000; Small 1987; Southern 1983).

In the late nineteenth century, minstrelsy and spirituals presented to white audiences grossly contrasting images of blacks and their music. The Jubilee Singers' popularity and spirituals were complicated by the enduring legacy of minstrelsy—the image explicitly against which they presented themselves, though white commentators continued to liken them. Unlike the risqué buffoonery represented by the Jim Crow of minstrelsy, the Jubilee Singers were models of propriety—neatly dressed, tightly disciplined, and musically elegant. Many whites assumed that they were really white, performing in a new form of blackface. One innkeeper did not realize they were black until they had checked into their rooms, then expelled them all. DuBois felt compelled to explicitly contrast spirituals to the representations of blacks in minstrelsy, positing spirituals as more authentic than minstrel-like “coon songs.” Gilroy captures the same theme a century later: “Black people singing slave songs as mass entertainment set new public standards of authenticity for black cultural expression. The legitimacy of these new cultural forms was established precisely through their distance from the racial codes of minstrelsy. The Jubilee Singers' journey out of America was a critical stage in making this possible” (1993: 88). At the time of their first recording in 1909, they were virtually the only black performers in the country whose music was distributed commercially.

For African American intellectuals, the popularity of spirituals presented a dilemma. The soulful and otherworldly symbolism seemed to dampen the urgency of freedom. “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen,” “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” and “There Is a Balm in Gilead” evoked images of salvation more than liberation, redemption more than justice, sorrow more than defiance. But this interpretation was challenged when W.E.B. DuBois, who had been a student at Fisk when the Jubilee Singers were at the height of their fame, in 1903 included a chapter on their activities in *The Souls of Black Folk* (DuBois 1989 [1903]). He argued that spirituals, what he called “sorrow songs,” were a central signifier of black culture and a repository of collective memory. Tracing knowledge of the music back to *Slave Songs of the United States* and the Fisk Jubilee Singers, pitting the beauty of the spirituals against the debasement of popular “coon songs,” DuBois found the spirit of his people in the music: “And so by fateful chance the Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most

beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas. It has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all, it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people” (1989 [1903]: 178). DuBois did more than symbolically affirm what the abolitionists had argued—that the humanity of blacks was embodied in their musical creativity. He also bridged the social distance implied in the abolitionists’ account by universalizing the music. Spirituals were seen less as the unique expression of the black race than as an expression of *human* experience, a *gift* from their experience (not their nature) to everyone. DuBois’s conception of spirituals would later be extremely important to the redefinition of folk music as racially inclusive.⁷

In contrast to the common understandings of minstrelsy, which have overstated the distinction between “phony” commercial music and “authentic” indigenous music, popular conceptions of “Negro spirituals” have exaggerated their racial purity. Much recent scholarship has highlighted the contradictory racial meanings of spirituals, challenging conventional notions that spirituals represented either the essential African American culture or, conversely, that spirituals were only slave renditions of European hymns, or that their main function was to code secret messages of liberation (Courlander 1992; Cruz 1999; Eyerman and Jamison 1998; Filene 2000; Gilroy 1993; Small 1987; Southern 1983).

Spirituals were constructed in a genre and used to make claims about the essence of African American culture, the resilience of European culture, or slaves’ deep commitment to liberation, claims that closely paralleled the claims being made about folk music. The white “discovery” of spirituals by northern abolitionists, like the first project of folklorists, shaped a discourse of peoplehood around musical expression. Both abolitionists and folklorists painted sympathetic though alien portraits of people doing the music. While the original shapers of the sympathetic discourse about spirituals were describing the music of groups they did not belong to, a generation later, educated African Americans such as W.E.B. DuBois and the promoters of the Fisk Jubilee Singers were affirming music as the essence of their own groups, just as nationalist folklorists did. Thus it would not be an unreasonable leap to broaden the concept of folk music to include spirituals, an opportunity activists and scholars would undertake in the new century.

MINSTRELSY

Though spirituals were widely known to Americans in postbellum America, the genre’s social setting was only loosely connected to the market.

Spirituals were typically sung by black college students or local choirs. Performances were more frequently in churches or civic auditoriums than the profit-seeking bars, medicine shows, or music halls where other genres were heard. And though commercial publishers vigorously marketed spirituals to performers, most of those active in the musical world of the spiritual worked through institutions other than business. But the racial dynamics of commercial music adopted very different genres, meanings, and social relations. While spirituals were the genre that contemporaries and subsequent historians have embraced to affirm black respectability, most Americans of the nineteenth century had a very different image of what black music was about, one based in the social setting of commercial music and the genre of minstrelsy.

Unlike dance music and religion, which synthesized African and European music by bringing black and white musicians together, minstrelsy created a fusion based on a white caricature of slave culture. Minstrelsy was *the* mass popular culture in antebellum America, a form of entertainment that reached across class and regional lines, something that most people knew about even if they rarely attended. Traveling troupes of entertainers performed in tents, meeting halls, and lodges, offering an eclectic program of comedy skits, formal oratory, songs, dances, jugglers, acrobats, and dramatic vignettes. They were the conduit of stereotypes and the main source of black cultural images to whites who lacked direct knowledge from interaction. Among the most imitated acts was “Jim Crow,” a white (most often Irish) actor painted in blackface, popularized by T. D. Rice in the 1820s. “Jim Crow” was a jolly, happy-go-lucky, feckless plantation slave who implicitly needed a paternalistic master for his own good. Thirty years later, James K. Kennard, Jr. wrote in the *Knickerbocker* magazine, “From the nobility and gentry, down to the lowest chimney-sweep in Great Britain, and from the member of Congress, down to the youngest apprentice or school-boy in America, it was all:

Turn about and wheel about, and do just so,
And every time I turn about I jump Jim Crow.”
(1996 [1845]: 52)

Although unabashedly racist, minstrelsy was a site where European- and African-derived cultures influenced each other. The thicket of white attitudes toward black culture included ample ambivalence. While the purveyors of minstrelsy were shamelessly appropriating black culture in support of a vicious slave system, they were attracted to what they were stealing. Lott has eloquently described how white performers and composers exploited, distorted, yet paradoxically affirmed African American culture: “Blackface performance, the first formal public acknowledgment by whites of black culture, was based on small but significant crimes against settled ideas of racial demarcation, which indeed appear to be

inevitable when white Americans enter the haunted realm of racial fantasy” (1993: 4). Stephen Foster, the nineteenth century’s most popular songwriter, and many of minstrelsy’s founders such as T. D. Rice and E. P. Christy reported how they conducted what we would call fieldwork, spending time in black communities, at social functions, and work sites to learn songs and speech mannerisms. Unlike the public accommodations that would be racially segregated under the system later named for the minstrel character Jim Crow, minstrel shows were often shared by the full gamut of class and racial groups. Here is a description of a Boston minstrel in the third decade of the nineteenth century.

It appeared that the gallery was the resort of the particoloured race of Africans, the descendants of Africans, and the vindicators of the abolition of the slave trade; that the tier of boxes below it in the center was occupied by single gentlewomen who had lodgings to let, and who were equally famous for their delicacy and taciturn disposition. The remainder of the boxes, I was given to understand, were visited by none but the dandies, and people of the first respectability and fashion; while the pit presented a mixed multitude of the lower orders of all sorts, sizes, ages, and deportments. (quoted in Lott 1993: 65)

Not only did minstrelsy bring people of different classes, races, and ethnicities into the same venue, it also provided a locus for groups to sort out their relationships to each other. A harbinger of the multicultural American identity was forged here. While existing cultural forms carried the indelible stamp of distinctively European, African, or Native American sights and sounds, minstrelsy was a new synthesis that mocked all three. W. T. Lhamon Jr. thus describes how blackface was an opportunity for working-class youths of various ethnicities to find a common identity tag. Jim Crow came to represent ethnicity in general: “Precisely because middle-class aspirants disdained the black jitterbug in every region, the black figure appealed all across the Atlantic as an organizational emblem for workers and the unemployed. Hated everywhere, he could be championed everywhere alike” (1998: 44). The frontier rube, the hard-drinking Irish, and the peculiar-sounding German were familiar stereotypes that captured the fancy of audiences, though never as enthusiastically as Jim Crow.

So it is not a coincidence that the cultural meaning of minstrelsy in the first half of the nineteenth century would anticipate folk music in the early twentieth century. Both were contrasted to high culture. Toll (1974) interprets minstrelsy as the origin of the highbrow-lowbrow distinction, a cultural form created in Jacksonian America to demarcate democratic American culture from effete European influence. Folk music is, by definition, *not* high culture. Both were seen as embodying deeply American

expressions. All of minstrelsy's stock characters were uniquely American, helping construct the new nation's sense of national character. The ingenious Yankee Doodle, the braggart frontiersman Davy Crockett, and the slaphappy Jim Crow developed as recognizable national types, stock characters in American imagery ever since.

After the Civil War, blacks aspiring to reach large white audiences increasingly took their cues on white tastes from minstrels. Blacks were not only exposed to minstrel shows as audience and performers, they were consumers of the sheet music that circulated minstrel music. For example, African American singer Will Stark sang for Alan Lomax the grossly caricatured song, "Coon, Coon, Coon,"⁸ reporting that he had learned it at a show and that it had been very popular among white folks about 1914. But he did not take his cues from white audiences uncritically, telling Lomax that he also learned from that song a more general lesson in race relations, that "Most singers are ignorant and think that anything the boss wants, they ought to do it, that they can't get along without help from him. But white folks don't like a smart nigger, that is, one that knows too much for his own interest or his own race" (Lomax 1942).

Although the invention of folk music was contrasted to crassly commercial popular music, minstrelsy was an important element in the lineage of what became American folk music in the twentieth century. Both the meanings claimed for the music and many of the particular styles and songs were shared. Just as minstrelsy was the cultural expression of a project to define the American nation, folk music was a belated affirmation of the claim that America did indeed have an indigenous culture. J. K. Kennard, Jr. wrote in the New York *Knickerbocker* in 1845,

The popular song-maker sways the souls of men; the legislator rules only their bodies. The song-maker reigns through love and spiritual affinity; the legislator by brute force. Apply this principle to the American people. Who are our true rulers? The negro poets, to be sure! Do they not set the fashion, and give laws to the public taste? Let one of them, in the swamps of Carolina, compose a new song, and it no sooner reaches the ear of a white amateur, than it is written down, amended, (that is, almost spoilt), printed, and then put upon a course of rapid dissemination, to cease only with the utmost bounds of AngloSaxon-
dom, perhaps of the world. (1996 [1845]: 62)

Folk music apostles a century later would expound no less rhapsodically about blues and spirituals as the true heart of the American spirit: "In representations of black life, audiences sought the wellhead of a native culture; and so, moreover, did a [*sic*] increasingly stylized representation of black culture come to provide the codes for wider representations of American folk culture" (Cantwell 1998: 66–67). Both the exponents of

minstrelsy and the later advocates of folk music rooted their authenticity in the dialectic of race. While minstrelsy originally depicted a broad variety of characters, including sympathetic, though hardly equal, black characters, as slavery increasingly polarized the nation and as European immigrant workers found common cause in their whiteness, minstrelsy became more about race (Toll 1974). Just as authenticity symbolically links the identity of audiences to the identity of the performers, minstrelsy helped the white audience find common bonds in who they were not. Similarly, folk music a half century later was defined as authentic by its racial grounding, first as Anglo-American and then more broadly to include racially defined spirituals.

The relationship of minstrelsy to folk was deeper than analogy. Many of the styles and particular songs that became “folk” in the early twentieth century were distinctly colored by minstrelsy, colored both in the general sense of influence of the music and in the specific sense of giving racial meaning. Since popular culture did not distinguish between authentic and commercial forms, vernacular music indiscriminately scrambled songs with ancient roots and songs local singers would learn from minstrels, juke joints, and print.

Because the category of “folk” had not yet reached performers or their audiences, the boundaries between vernacular music and commercial music were virtually nonexistent. The extent to which people made a living through their music ranged from those earning a few dollars occasionally for a performance or lesson to those who identified themselves as professional performers with agents and business managers. People learned music from relatives, coworkers, performers, and sheet music, as well as at dances or minstrels, caring little if a song was ancient or new in origin, if it was composed by an individual or adapted through generations, or if it was performed for profit, fun, leisure, or work. When folklorists began to collect music from rural musicians, many songs that had begun in minstrelsy and had been published as sheet music had been passed along orally and their origins forgotten, then collected as folk music. Well-known tunes that graduated from minstrelsy to folk status include “Old Zip Coon”/“Turkey in the Straw” and “Blue Tail Fly,” both of which combined the repetition of short phrases characteristic of African American music with the symmetry of phrase structure more characteristic of European traditions (Lott 1993: 177). The discourse of minstrelsy has emphasized that it was a commercialized, urban, “artificial,” and overtly racist form of entertainment, while the discourse of folk music has depicted an indigenous, rural, authentic, and racially innocent past time. But the boundary was much less distinct in lived experience. While minstrelsy was a form of commercial entertainment, it not only

was informed by indigenous music but was enjoyed and played by non-professionals in their parlors, at dances, and at juke joints. Rather than facing a wall between commercial and indigenous music, minstrelsy was a loop in the folk process, mediated by professional musicians and theater (Bluestein 1994; Toll 1974).

One of the most enduring legacies of minstrelsy was the set of codes that would later be affirmed as authenticity. The cultural syntax that polarized urban and rural, modern and traditional, sophisticated and simple, commercial and folk, fleeting and grounded gave rise to cultural codes we have inherited from minstrelsy. While the direct lineage of minstrelsy shaped vaudeville, musical theater, Tin Pan Alley, and Hollywood, the critique of superficiality lodged at those heirs was created in the progenitor. “Popular” became a synonym for insincere, contrasting with a more marginal but reputable “authentic.” Not only are particular instruments and vocal styles we identify as genuine rooted in minstrelsy, but the notion that performers can appropriate the culture of other groups, representing themselves as faux slaves, frontiersmen, and country bumpkins, distilling for their audiences the alleged “essence” of those cultures, all arose with minstrelsy. And it is the groups that were jeered by the minstrels that are now the measure of authenticity. The blues and country music that now are considered America’s most authentic voices are the legacies of racial synthesis refracted through minstrelsy.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR FOLK MUSIC

When the United States abolished slavery, the concept of folk music had not been invented. People made music in many institutional settings with a variety of opinions about the qualities that would eventually be ascribed to folk music. Over the rest of the nineteenth century, the cultural distinctions later crystallized in the concept of folk music emerged from a variety of social settings. The rise of copyright laws and the sheet music industry would heighten consciousness about authorship and anonymity. Urbanization would deepen the distinction between cosmopolitan and parochial cultures, with the defeated South bearing the onus of provinciality. The formation of an urban upper class would engender a cultural elite, increasing the salience of a virtuosity-simplicity antithesis. And aristocratic academics would import from Europe and England an ideology locating the soul of the nation in the preservation of a fleeting past.

By the end of the nineteenth century, minstrelsy was giving way to vaudeville as the most popular form of live vernacular music. Popular music, propelled by the growing music publishing industry, was reaching

into the homes of a broad range of Americans, while rural folk were making music at barn dances, juke joints, churches, and hoedowns. High culture was being distinguished from lowbrow, modern from traditional, and urban from rural. But modern urban life elicited a critique that affirmed a nostalgic vision of traditional rural life. The vernacular music of the rural South afforded a cultural project that turned sophisticated, progressive urban life on its head, valorizing the “folk” and their culture as the true embodiment of peoplehood. The folk project began in Europe as a part of a broader nation-building effort and was adapted in America to clarify the American racial dilemma. The concept then became a contested resource for conflicts over who would be defined as American and enjoy the rights and privileges implied thereby, culminating in the twentieth century’s greatest conflict over national membership, the civil rights movement.

In the meantime, the music that later became enshrined as “folk” was just music to the people making it. It continued to develop in the same institutions as before the war, where blacks and whites blended the heritage of Africa and Europe into an originally American vernacular music. The people making and enjoying music knew little of the emergent folk music cultural project which claimed that the music was something more than entertainment.

CONCLUSION

The changing relationship between musical genres and social boundaries can be best understood by recognizing the contextual specificity of social boundaries such as race. While fundamental social boundaries pervade all social relations, they operate differently in different contexts such as jobs, the law, media content, intimacy, and cultural production. In some contexts, interaction among people of different races is permissible, though often hierarchical—work, domestic labor, commercial sales, and so forth. In other contexts the boundaries are stronger, though when breached are more egalitarian, as in romance and marriage. In still other situations, there is official equality, though perhaps with a strong undercurrent of informal inequality, as found in sports and music. From this perspective, it is not surprising that racial relations may have been less segregated in music than in other realms of life. Though there is probably no setting immune from race, some contexts are more inclusive than others. To the extent that racial boundaries are contextualized, the variable racial meanings of music can be explained from features of its social context. In the nineteenth century, American vernacular music was made in contexts with more interracial interaction than in many other arenas of

society. Such settings were by no means egalitarian, but they were places of interracial contact, not absolute segregation. The vernacular music made in festive occasions, abolitionist organizations, minstrel and medicine shows, spirituals, other religious music, and black middle-class forays into white respectability was the raw material for what would be defined as folk music.

Vernacular American music was threaded through a complex web of social relationships and institutions, bridging and bounding class, race, gender, and region. “The folk” made music in the home, church, dance parlor, minstrel hall, and workplace. Sounds imported from Europe and Africa blended and regenerated to become the music we call American. In a society so infused with the social dynamics of race, it is inevitable that music be given racial meaning and contribute to the functioning of the racial system. But the ways that music has been given racial meaning, the identities that have been built on music, and the effects of the racialization of music have not been inevitable. It was not inevitable that the abolitionist movement would choose to humanize slaves by promoting their music or that postbellum college choirs would crystallize the music into the genre we know as spirituals. It was not inevitable that minstrelsy, the most popular form of vernacular music of the nineteenth century, be built on the ambivalent white appropriation and caricature of slave music. It was the interpretation of these events and relationships by white liberals such as James McKim and black intellectuals such as W.E.B. DuBois that kindled the powerful trope that would later ignite as authenticity. While the humanizing of slaves through music may have had a minuscule effect in ending slavery compared with the carnage of the Civil War, and while the popularity of the Fisk Jubilee Singers in northern cities may not have saved a single black life from the horror of lynching in the late nineteenth century, the social world of music departs from a singular correspondence of cultural difference and structures of domination. In the twentieth century, the status hierarchy of music inverted the broader system of racism. In music, “black” has come to be defined as good, signifying originality, feeling, talent, and that most ineffable but important quality, soul. “White” is an insult for musicians, implying banality, dispassion, even insignificance. The roots of this inversion were planted in the nineteenth century and cultivated in the twentieth. Among the fruits was the opportunity for social movements to influence some of the systems of domination that music by itself could little affect.

Authenticity is especially important in a sociological understanding because it redefines the terms of homology between cultural and social boundaries. Representing an affirmation of culture presumably expressed from the heart, authenticity unsettles the link between social status and respectable culture, justifying elite embrace of indigenous culture, not

just their own highbrow culture. Authenticity is an imputed relationship between culture and people, mutually validating a set of qualities about the people and the verisimilitude of the culture. People otherwise deemed uncouth by the dominant group become redefined as pure, and their culture, by its association with the group, shares the purity. Cultural capital gets turned on its head.