

# AMERICAN MUSIC REVIEW

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## **“The Biggest Feminist in the World”: On Miley Cyrus, Feminism, and Intersectionality<sup>1</sup>**

Alexandra Apolloni, UCLA

On 14 November 2013 Miley Cyrus proclaimed her feminism to an unsuspecting world. “I feel like I’m one of the biggest feminists in the world because I tell women not to be scared of anything,” she said. “Girls are beautiful. Guys get to show their titties on the beach, why can’t we?”<sup>2</sup> For a media-friendly soundbite, this quotation actually reveals a lot about a phenomenon that, for simplicity’s sake, I’m going to refer to as Miley feminism. Miley feminism is about fearlessness: about being unafraid to make choices, to be yourself, to self-express. It’s about appropriating a masculine-coded kind of individual freedom: the freedom to not care, to show your titties on the beach, to party without consequences, to live the “can’t stop won’t stop” dream that Cyrus sang about in “We Can’t Stop,” the arresting pop anthem that was inescapable during the summer of 2013. This feminism is transgressive, up to a point: Miley imagines a kind of femininity that flagrantly rejects the rules of respectability and propriety that define normative notions of girlhood. Miley’s not the only one singing the song of this type of feminism: we could be talking about Ke\$ha feminism—Ke\$ha’s laissez-faire persona led Ann Powers to compare her to the screwball comediennes of yore—or draw a connection to Icona Pop and their brazen choruses proclaiming “I don’t care.”<sup>3</sup> Cyrus’s performances, though, seem to have pushed buttons in ways that those of her peers haven’t. When she twerked on stage at the MTV Video Music Awards (VMA) in a teddy-bear onesie, taunting the audience with her omnipresent stuck-out tongue, it was Miley feminism made manifest, with all of its potential and limitations there for us to see. Here was a young woman rejecting the rules that tell us that girls need to be quiet and good. But here, too, as her critics have pointed out, was a member of pop royalty who could afford to reject those rules;



*Miley Cyrus  
Courtesy of RCA Records*

whose whiteness and wealth let her do so with relatively few consequences; and who, like generations of white rock and pop singers before her, was drawing on musical traditions from communities of color to facilitate her transgressions.

The Miley feminism moment followed on the heels of a moment of intense (and intensely necessary) debate in online feminist circles. On

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12 August 2013, Mikki Kendall, a writer and activist who tweets under the username Karnythia, started using the twitter hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen.<sup>4</sup> The hashtag was appended to tweets that called out feminist

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activists who perpetuated racism and classism under the auspices of feminism; who didn’t see anti-racist work as a fundamental aspect of working for gender equality; and who disregarded or appropriated the contributions of women of color to feminist thought.<sup>5</sup> While #solidarityisforwhitewomen was reacting to one very specific instance of racism rearing its head in online feminist circles, it broadened and spread to reflect the frustration of activists, mostly women of color, whose work and ideas remain marginal in a conversation dominated by mainstream, online feminist publications like *Feministing* and *Jezebel*.<sup>6</sup>

#solidarityisforwhitewomen built on the work of generations of womanist and anti-racist feminists, from the Combahee River Collective, who called for a feminism recognizing “interlocking oppressions” in the 1970s, to scholars like Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term “intersectionality.”<sup>7</sup> These scholars and activists called for intersectional understandings of gender and sexuality—that is, understanding how gender articulates with other categories, including race, class, and ability, to shape identities and experiences. #solidarityisforwhitewomen shows how much work mainstream feminism still needs to do in this regard.

I am not interested in policing Miley Cyrus’s right to call herself a feminist. Reading her declaration of feminism in the context of #solidarityisforwhitewomen does, however, reveal the limitations of Miley feminism. As it has been articulated and enacted in performance, Miley feminism is about individual empowerment, not about recognizing or combating institutional power structures; it’s liberal to the point of being nearly libertarian. Miley feminism is about being unafraid to do and say what you want, but when I think about this through an intersectional frame, I’m reminded of note of caution that Wendy Brown raises in “Freedom’s Silences”: that when we speak, we always risk silencing another.<sup>8</sup>

As a feminist musicologist interested in questions of the voice—both literal and metaphorical—the question of whose voices get heard and whose voices get silenced (and the how and the why of it) is key to how I’ve been trying to think through Miley Cyrus’s performances and responses to them.<sup>9</sup> Listening to the justifiable frustration and anger that’s been voiced over

racial inequality in online feminism has fundamentally shaped my thinking about how race, appropriation, and power work to create silences both in musical performances and in the way we talk about them. I’ve found it productive to start by thinking about the activist practice of *signal-boosting*, and to extend it to considerations both of musical performances and conversations about musical performances by thinking in terms of *amplification*.

Signal-boosting is fundamental to the kind of online activism exemplified by #solidarityisforwhitewomen. Signal-boosting can be as simple as drawing attention to someone else’s ideas: so, if you’re a blogger with a big following, it’s could be the act of pointing your readers to someone else’s writing. It amounts to using your platform to amplify other people’s writing, ideas, and voices; and it’s an activist gesture that attempts to create a feminist conversation that isn’t just white and middle-class, but includes people of color, different social classes, etc. You can think of it as metaphorically passing the mic so that other people get a chance to be heard, using one’s voice and position to amplify other people’s voices. With this practice in mind, I have been approaching Cyrus’s performances by asking whose voices they are amplifying.

By asking about amplification, I’m trying to move away from a type of critique that would frame performances like Cyrus’s solely in terms of appropriation. Certainly, cultural appropriation is part of what is happening here: when Miley Cyrus twerks, for instance, she’s drawing on a performance tradition that recently manifested in the mainstream via the New Orleans bounce scene, and the sound of *Bangerz*, her most recent album, draws heavily on sounds associated with hip hop. As many of her critics have pointed out, what we have here is another iteration of a young, white musician drawing on performance traditions from communities of color to self-authenticate, potentially disenfranchising those communities in the process.

My concern with turning to the familiar love-and-theft, appropriation model is twofold: first, it reifies racial categories like black and white, and doesn’t do enough to explore how music contributes to constructing those categories and how musical traditions are more complex than such categorization would have us think. Recent scholarship on music and race,

## “The Biggest Feminist in the World” (cont.)

including work by scholars such as Daphne Brooks, Nina Eidsheim, Karl Hagstrom-Miller, and Guthrie P. Ramsey, has pushed us beyond an appropriation framework by demonstrating how musical practices have complex positions in histories of racialization and help produce knowledge about race. The hip hop Miley flirts with and twerks to, for instance, didn’t emerge from a racially segregated vacuum; it’s the product of multiple cultural intersections. My second concern is that thinking only in terms of appropriation leaves out key voices, and reproduces the very patterns of inequality that we would critique. Miley Cyrus’s performances—though she fronts them—are, ultimately, *not* solo performances. I want to understand her relationship with the other players who make them possible, to understand the extent to which those relationships are collaborative or hierarchical. Focusing only on Cyrus’s acts of appropriation makes it harder to see these kinds of relationships, and makes it harder to critique the way, on a larger level, networks of power operate in the music industry. The formulation that “Miley appropriates black music” reinforces a hegemonic dichotomy of black and white, and neglects a much more complex historical and social reality.

Asking whose voices are amplified and whose voices are silenced lets me critique the very flagrant displays of privilege in Cyrus’s recent performances while also listening for the voices of other people who have helped create those performances. When Miley Cyrus appeared on the VMAs, we weren’t just hearing and seeing Miley. We were seeing the manifestation of the work of producers (including Mike Will, who produced “We Can’t Stop”), of directors and choreographers, of songwriters, dancers, and musicians, and even of the audience and Miley’s fans, whose responses to her are as much a part of the performance as her singing. This network gets lost when we make Miley the center of the story, and sometimes neglecting these other players might lead us to reproducing the same inequalities that we would like to critique.

This issue is particularly acute in considering Cyrus’s VMA background dancers. The most notorious moment in the performance comes when Cyrus approaches one of the dancers, a statuesque black woman, and grabs her backside. Bloggers responding to the performance have dwelt on this moment and the way it objectifies the dancer, and black women’s bodies more generally. Several writers point to the way this moment evokes Saartjie Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman from South Africa who was sold into slavery in the nineteenth century and put on display in Europe as the “Hottentot Venus.” As far as I have been able

to discern, however, none of these writers have taken the step of finding out who the dancers on stage with Cyrus are. Without considering the nature of their participation in the VMA performance, it’s impossible to really understand how agency, power, and, indeed, appropriation, were operating on that stage.

The dancer that Miley Cyrus grabbed is Ashley Adair, who performs using the stage name Amazon Ashley.<sup>10</sup> Adair is a fixture in burlesque scenes in Hollywood, and, by all appearances, Cyrus’s good friend. The two appear regularly in one another’s twitter feeds, and Adair is, at time of writing, on tour with Cyrus. Adair also takes great pride in claiming to be the

person who taught Cyrus to twerk.<sup>11</sup>

To reduce Ashley Adair to a symbol undermines her agency, and discounts the fact that she surely has her own motivations for performing with Miley—it has certainly raised her profile, and it’s likely that she has benefited in other material ways as well. Considering Adair’s agency does not place her above reproach nor exempt the performance from critique—there is still plenty to be said about the problematic elements of that performance, in terms of race, gender, and sexuality. It does, however, add a layer of complexity to readings of the VMA performance, while leaving her out risks reproducing the very patterns of marginalization that we would critique. To put this in terms of amplification, then: Adair’s “voice”—her presence, subjectivity, and agen-



Miley Cyrus  
Courtesy of RCA Records  
Photo by Tyrone Lebon



## “The Biggest Feminist in the World” (cont.)

cy—play a crucial role in Cyrus’ VMA performance. The performance, however, amplifies Cyrus over Adair, while our conversations about Cyrus have perhaps had the unintended effect of creating another instance of silencing.

To bring this back to feminism and intersectionality, I want to consider how the idea of amplification could serve as a model for activism through performance. There’s a moment out of a musical performance from 1965 that shows this kind of amplification in practice. That year, British singer Dusty Springfield hosted a television special called *The Sounds of Motown* that featured some of Motown’s most well-known acts. Motown didn’t have an established following in Britain at the time. Springfield had been a fan of African-American music from a young age, and while she wanted to be able to sing like her favorite black American artists, she was just as invested in using her platform as a celebrity to advocate for them.<sup>12</sup>

In *Sounds of Motown* she performs a duet with Martha Reeves and the Vandellas. Midway through the number a key moment of amplification occurs: Springfield moves to the side, so that she’s on the edge of the frame, with the Vandellas (Rosalind Ashford and Betty Kelly) in the middle. This simple but crucial act of stepping aside puts the *backup* singers—women whose voices were usually just used to support other people, and not ever the showcase—momentarily become the focus. They get amplified.

Like Cyrus’s work, this performance has messy origins: it’s the product of people from a range of social positions and levels of privilege coming together, and, as Motown employees, the amount of agency the Vandellas had in shaping the performance is difficult to ascertain. But asking “whose voice gets amplified here, how, and why” lets me think about all of the people who are part of this performance, lets me think about how much agency they have, and how they use their positions to amplify, or perhaps silence other voices.

Thinking in terms of amplification is productive for multiple reasons: first, it assumes that marginalized people are already speaking. They are active, they have agency, they aren’t sitting around waiting for someone with more power to give them permission. It also acknowledges, however, that because of social inequality, their voices often get drowned out. It places

responsibility on people with established platforms to stop doing things that drown out those other voices and to actively create platforms that boost marginalized voices. I also like this model because it can apply both to the question of what is happening (or not happening) in a performance, and to how we talk about performances.

I want to end, then, with a challenge to Miley Cyrus. As I said above, I don’t want to police her right to claim a feminist identity. I do, however, want to call on her to think about how she uses her position, and what her feminism could mean. I’m challenging Cyrus to not just be the kind of feminist who is all about individual choices, self-empowerment, and not being scared to amplify her own voice (which is important and has its place), but to also be the kind of feminist who thinks intersectionally, and uses her platform to amplify other people’s voices too.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This piece is derived from comments that I delivered as part of panel called “Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: Critical Perspectives on Miley Cyrus,” that was hosted by UCLA’s Hip Hop Congress and DiverseCity Dialogues series on 19 November 2013. Thank you to the student organizers and activists who put the event together, and to my colleagues and co-panelists, Wade Dean, Mike D’Errico, Tamara Levitz, Libby Lewis, Tiffany Naiman, and Caroline Streeter, whose thoughtful perspectives on Miley greatly informed me as I developed this piece.

<sup>2</sup> Cavan Sieczkowski, “Miley Cyrus Thinks She’s ‘One Of The Biggest Feminists In The World,’” *Huffington Post*, 14 November 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/14/miley-cyrus-feminist\\_n\\_4274194.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/14/miley-cyrus-feminist_n_4274194.html).

<sup>3</sup> Ann Powers, “Album Review: Ke\$ha Is a Wisecracking ‘Animal,’” *Pop and Hiss: The LA Times Music Blog*, 4 January 2010, [http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/music\\_blog/2010/01/album-review-keha-is-a-wisecracking-animal.html](http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/music_blog/2010/01/album-review-keha-is-a-wisecracking-animal.html).

<sup>4</sup> Mikki Kendall, “#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen When WOC Are Treated as Teaching Tools & Resources, Not Actual People by Big Name Feminism,” Twitter post, 12 Aug 2013 16:36:00 GMT, <https://twitter.com/Karnythia/statuses/366961489476718592>.

<sup>5</sup> While Kendall was the first to use the hashtag, it was quickly adopted by many other Twitter users. Some of the more prolific

## “The Biggest Feminist in the World”

(cont.)

contributors to the hashtag include Flavia Dzodan (@redlightvoices), Amadi Aec Lovelace (@amaditalks), Trudy (@thetrudz), and Sydette (@blackamazon). This list is by no means exhaustive.

<sup>6</sup>Kendall and Dzodan provide background on #solidarityisfor-whitewomen in an interview with Jia Tolentino of The Hairpin: “A Chat with Mikki Kendall and Flavia Dzodan About #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen,” *The Hairpin*, 13 August 2013, <http://thehairpin.com/2013/08/solidarity-is-for-hairpin/>.

<sup>7</sup>See Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review*, 1991, 1241–1299; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 2000); Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (Rutgers University Press, 1983), 264–274.

<sup>8</sup>Wendy Brown, “Freedom’s Silences,” in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) 83–97.

<sup>9</sup>Elizabeth K. Keenan’s examination of race, gender, and sexuality in the reception of Liz Phair’s *Exile in Guyville* grapples with similar questions. Keenan writes, “The question for Third Wave feminism is not if the movement encompasses all of those voices, which it does, but who has the privilege to say what, and whose voice is most prominent.” “If *Exile in Guyville* Made You a Feminist, What Kind of Feminist Are You?: Heterosexuality, Race, and Class in the Third Wave,” *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture*, Volume 14 (2010): 45–71.

<sup>10</sup>Thank you to Tamara Levitz for making contact with Ashley Adair, and further illuminating her role in Miley Cyrus’s performances.

<sup>11</sup>CJ Sitzer, “I Taught Miley How to Twerk,’ Says Amazon Ashley,” *In-Touch Weekly*, 19 September 2013, <http://www.intouch-weekly.com/posts/exclusive-i-taught-miley-how-to-twerk-says-amazon-ashley-26881>.

<sup>12</sup>For more on Springfield and Reeves, see Annie Randall, *Dusty!: Queen of the Postmods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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## Institute News

Jeffrey Taylor, CUNY Brooklyn College & Graduate Center

We are delighted to welcome **Elizabeth Keenan** as our Guest Editor for this special issue, devoted to women and popular music. Elizabeth completed her doctorate in ethnomusicology at Columbia University in 2008. She is writing her first book, *Popular Music, Cultural Politics, and the Third Wave Feminist Public*, which investigates cultural politics and identity-based movements in US popular music since 1990. She has published in *Women and Music*, the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, and *Current Musicology*, has presented her research at a variety of conferences, and writes a regular column for the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* Vitae website, and teaches music history at Fordham University. Elizabeth was a guest of the Institute in spring 2011, when she delivered the talk "Riot Grrrl Is Dead. Long Live Riot Grrrl: Political Activism, Nostalgia, and Historiography." It has been a pleasure working with her on this important publication.

A highlight of our spring offerings was a special concert on 15 May, celebrating the Latin/Jewish connection in jazz. Our guests were clarinetist **Anat Cohen**, trombonist and euphonium player **Rafi Malkiel**, and pianist **Arturo O'Farrill**, with the Brooklyn College Big Band. The performance featured compositions and arrangements by O'Farrill, Malkiel, and others, and brought the enthusiastic Whitman Hall audience to its feet. The event was filmed by the College's Department of TV/Radio, to be broadcast on CUNY's cable TV channel. By the way, Professor O'Farrill will be joining the Conservatory of Music as a full-time faculty member and ISAM Associate this fall. More on that in our next issue!

Our May jazz concert was preceded by a series of talks and lecture/performances that covered a wide variety of topics. In February, **Elizabeth Wollman** spoke on "Hair and the Gender Politics of Late-1960s Youth Culture" (see her contribution to the current issue). In April, "Singing the Gods: Songs of Devotion, Praise, and Invocation in Brooklyn" brought together Brooklyn-based artists from Brazil, Morocco, India and the Caribbean in a celebration of both the contrasts and commonalities in world sacred music traditions. And in May composer and

saxophonist **Dan Blake** offered some thought-provoking ideas (gleaned largely from personal experience) about the process of improvisation in experimental music.

It was a busy term for the Institute, but our staff still continued to pursue personal research, composition, and performing projects. Graduate Fellow **Whitney George** guest-conducted the Low Brass Connection for a concert series in Germany and Holland titled "Sounds After the Oil War," premiering her new work for trombone choir "Carelessly Open, Something Unsaid, the Phone off the Hook." In May, she conducted her tenth consecutive concert with the Contemporary Music Ensemble of the CUNY Graduate Center titled "Exquisite Corpse" featuring new works by emerging New York women composers, in addition to selections from Gideon's "Sonnets from Shakespeare." The coming year will see her at work on a variety of new commissions, as well as conducting additional performances of her works.



Rafi Malkiel, Anat Cohen, and Arturo O'Farrill  
in rehearsal with the Brooklyn College Big Band  
Photo by Jeffrey Taylor

Besides performing the vocal solo in the Gideon piece mentioned above, Research Associate **Stephanie Jensen-Moulton** continued her work on American opera and disability this spring, with a lecture at Eastman School of Music on *Einstein on the Beach* ("Disability as Postmodernism") and a presentation of her work on Jake Heggie's opera *Moby-Dick* at the annual meeting of the Society for Disability Studies. This

summer, she will speak on a panel about women composers associated with the Sylvia Milo's play "The Other Mozart" here in New York City, an event organized by composer/sound designer Nathan Davis.

Director **Jeffrey Taylor** continues his research and writing on player pianos and popular music of the 1920s, as well as the music of Pharoah Sanders, and this past April was joined by HISAM Advisory Board member **Judith Tick** for a talk about Ella Fitzgerald and her arrangers, prior to a concert by the Smithsonian Masterworks Orchestra at the Brooklyn Center for the Performing Arts. Finally, congratulations to Senior Research Associate **Ray Allen**, who will begin a year-long sabbatical this fall during which he will continue work on his current book project tentatively titled *Jump Up: West Indian Carnival Music in Brooklyn*.



# Lullabies, Schoolyard Hijinks, and Alterity: tUnE-yArDs Returns with *Nikki Nack*

Michael P. Lupo, CUNY Graduate Center

Merrill Garbus writes music from the rhythms of social experience. From her days in Putney, Vermont at the Sunglass Theater improvising outlandish scenarios with her homemade hand puppets to her travels to Lamu, Kenya studying *taarab*, human engagement across borders and ages has served as her principal catalyst for creativity. The spontaneity of individual and communal expression is rarely captured adequately in the pop format, and if successful attempts can be located they are typically far removed from the use of *musique concrète*, electronic percussion loops, disjunct melodies, and lyrical non-sequiturs. Yet this is exactly what Garbus and bassist/collaborator Nate Brenner have in mind for their project, tUnE-yArDs, as they write songs that are machinic, sporadic, and at times frightening, yet simultaneously warm, exuberant, and carefree. These contradictions have played a role in transforming the duo—along with their small, backing saxophone ensemble—from coffee-shop and record-store heroes to Arcade Fire tourmates.

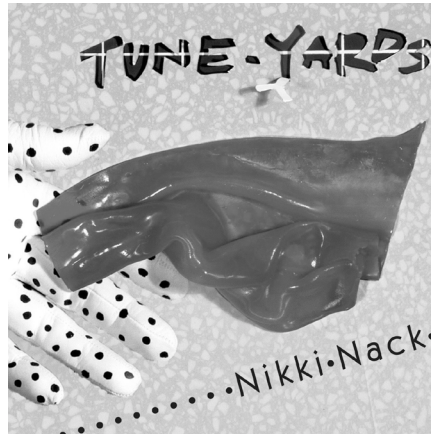
With their economic capital catching up to their cultural capital, tUnE-yArDs's release of their third and most recent album, *Nikki Nack* (May 2014), brings in more chefs than have typically been allowed in Garbus's kitchen, most notably producers John Hill and Malay. Perhaps as a result, notable extensions of their highly acclaimed sophomore recording *who kill* (2011) can be found, including a greater reliance on Brenner's spacious and groove-driven bass lines, a freer use of choral interjection and hard panning, a mixing and matching of verse-chorus form and flash refrains, and a propensity for climactic textural accumulation near songs' conclusions. These novelties work in concert with the characteristics that define Garbus's idiolect, including her skip-rope-rhyme, boisterous vocal delivery, dark lullaby poetry, and a keenness for non-Western ways of structuring time. Her instant and unpredictable oscillation between uninhibited yawping and sinuous, mellifluous shadings imbues the music with a sense of extemporized mischievousness. *Nikki Nack* couches aspects of identity, Otherness, and violence in alliterative and consonant soundscapes,

embedding social critique in the innocence and power dynamics of playground antics. You can dance to it, too.

Although signing to the label 4AD in 2009 has provided tUnE-yArDs with access to increasingly sophisticated options for creating and editing sound, Garbus's compositional methods have hardly changed since her first self-produced album, *BiRd-BrAiNs* (2009). Roughly four months after its release, Garbus revealed her process of "improvised recording" in an interview with the Dedicated Ears music blog's Tony Rusniak. Garbus's strategy entails sampling environmental sounds—the sound of a ferry in the case of "Lions," for example—and spontaneously selecting fragments of them for use as rhythmic layers to undergird her vocal protrusions.<sup>1</sup> In her formative years living in Montreal (and perhaps later in Oakland as well), Garbus was armed with little more than a modest, hand-held Sony ICD-ST25 digital voice recorder,

a copy of GarageBand, and a plan to stand out via unconventional capitalization.<sup>2</sup> With a snare drum on her left, a floor tom on her right, a ukulele at hand, and electronic toys such as the Boss RC-2 looping pedal, Garbus embarked on a national tour of her own design, eventually catching the ear of 4AD. Label affiliation would force reconciliation between her methods and the technological options newly opened. Her aim was clear: embrace the ability to capture and create sounds with more fidelity while maintaining the sense of improvisation so essential to her method. As it turned out, *who kill* (2011), originally conceived as *Women Who Kill*, did that and much more.

*who kill* transformed tUnE-yArDs from solely an artistic manifestation of Merrill Garbus's veritable imagination to a collaboration project with Brenner.<sup>3</sup> The album received numerous accolades, including positive reviews from *Time*, *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, and *The New York Times*. In 2012, it was named the number one album of 2011 by critics in *The Village Voice*'s annual "Pazz and Jop" poll. As Sasha Frere-Jones wrote shortly after the release of *who kill*, "Garbus needs none of the fetishized



Merrill Garbus and tUnE-yArDs  
Photo from album cover Nikki Nack

## tUnE-yArDs Returns (cont.)

authenticity of [*BiRd-BrAiNs*’s] lower fidelity to charm anybody: she is a musician of startling range, and a better recording of her is simply better music.”<sup>4</sup> Amongst a sea of indie hopefuls, Garbus was able to distinguish herself as no mere passing fad, an artist whose work had more to it than its DIY immediacy.

Much attention was given to *w h o k i l l*’s singles, “Bizness” and “Gangsta.” The former features a high-register ostinato—which gets doubled in the sax section towards the song’s end—constructed from vocal interlocking. A sparse bass riff underlies the timbre of Garbus’s expressive, hostile shout-speech, which projects refrains defiantly, pleadingly, and exuberantly as if performed outside for ritual dance. Lines like “If you just press your fingers down under my skin (go on and do it)/Lift up, dig up, dig up and bleed for me/I say, I’ll bleed if you ask me/I’ll bleed if you ask me/ That’s when, that’s when, he said no” thematize victimization, perhaps of a sexual nature, while reversing normative gender performativity.<sup>5</sup> “Gangsta” contains fragments of Aka pygmy-sounding yodeling—presented in a lo-fi timbre that emulates a field recording—with numerous vocal phrase repetitions over an infectious rock groove. The saxophone section is featured here as well, twirling out of tune around lyrics that address a privileged subject’s process of acclimation and acculturation in a foreign environment. This is suggested in lyrics such as “Bang-bang, boy-ee/Never move to my hood/’Cause danger is crawlin’ out the wood.” We may speculate that experiences in Oakland and Africa solidified an awareness of issues related to class and race, but regardless, we hear anger, strength, satire, and perseverance.

“Gangsta” provided one of the first unmistakable contexts in which tUnE-yArDs’s appropriation of the music of central Africa became most evident, an aspect of Garbus’s music that has not gone unnoticed by critics.<sup>6</sup> This is a complex issue, too dense to be explored adequately here, but inescapable nonetheless. As ethnomusicologist Steven Feld pointed out in “Pygmy POP: A Genealogy of Schizophonic Mimesis,” the commodification of pygmy field recordings, through their reinterpretation in pop and art music, creates a series of unintended histories for the performance practices of Central African forest nomads.<sup>7</sup> Feld article offers four “critical ostinatos,” one of which collects these histories of the pygmy pop “genre.” He writes, “From Afri-nationalism

to Euro avant-gardism, from electroacoustic modernism to digital postmodernism, from highbrow to low, there’s a pygmy product to fit every viewpoint on authenticity and collaboration, every celebration of roots and hybridity.”<sup>8</sup> Garbus’s work, which certainly falls within the realm of “digital postmodernism” and is much more than a simple pygmy appropriation, nonetheless reifies a “complex humanity... fixed as a tape loop in the machine of both postcolonial devastation and primitivist fantasy.”<sup>9</sup> Garbus’s dress, use of the LP-timbre of Aka yodeling, two-against-three polyrhythms, bell patterns, and dance are certainly in danger of evoking the “primitivist fantasy” about which Feld writes, and Garbus is clearly aware of it.<sup>10</sup> The presence of these elements in Garbus’s music places her in dialogue with the many other artists who have done the same, albeit in different ways. We may ask what it means for African music to be transformed and transmitted to a mass audience by a white woman who grew up in the Connecticut suburb of New Canaan and attended Smith College. In so doing, we may also interrogate what these appropriations mean as a method for articulating alterity, that is, as a means of exposing alienating structures of power.

Garbus currently lives in Oakland, and even in the days before the arrival of notoriety, she likely faced fewer financial and social obstacles than the majority of those around her. To express alterity through a reinterpretation of the local—of adult, urban, African-American cultural signifiers—could potentially be considered a disingenuous and exploitative measure.

Detached from an African cultural history (and thus a shared social and somatic memory), there are no authenticating links between the African Diaspora and Garbus’s experiences and upbringing. Although well known by (ethno)musicologists, the musical practices and sounds of the pygmies are much more obscure to the average consumer of popular music. As such, they offer a more distant, less hegemonic arena within which Garbus is able to explore the structures of power that confine her agency as a white woman. Her interest in the function of music as a vehicle to interrogate Otherness offers an opportunity to change the conversation from viewing music *in* a context of cultural appropriation (and thus perhaps exploitation or fetishization) to functioning *as* a context for exploring power dynamics through the topics of nationality, childishness, and living with fear.



## tUnE-yArDs Returns (cont.)

An example that calls into question the notion of belonging is found in the song that opens *who kill*, “My Country.” The first lyrics heard on the album are “My country, ’tis of thee/Sweet land of liberty/How come I cannot see my future within your arms/Your love it turns me down/Into the underground/My country bleeding me; I will not stay in your arms.” Nationhood here is potentially conflated with sexual preference and the United States’s ambivalent attitude towards the subject. After a childlike teasing (“NAH-nah, nah, NAH-nah”/”nah, nah, nah, nah, NAH-nah”) intoned by a small choir, Garbus pointedly speaks solo: “The worst thing about living a lie is just wondering when they’ll find out.” By couching a pointed critique of the nation’s collective attitude on the support of popular music and the acceptance of “alternative” lifestyles in the putative innocence and ignorance of children’s song, Garbus’s message remains effective in its opacity, plasticity, and multidimensionality.

*Nikki Nack* continues to explore Otherness through careful distancing, with the innocence of schoolyard negotiations of dominance being even more pervasive. We would do well to first pause over two texts that assign a more important identity-forming function to these social dynamics than is typically acknowledged. Marina Warner’s introduction to Iona and Peter Opie’s 1959 book *The Lore and Language of School Children* situates the oral tradition of children’s verbal melees as an extension of street smarts and masculinity: “The typical sounds of children’s vernacular belong in the street, not the parlor, and they tap into demotic Anglo-Saxon, not Greek or Latin; musically plosive and guttural, with end-stopped consonants rather than mellifluous, open, ‘feminine’ rhymes...”<sup>11</sup> Warner goes on to claim that such linguistic sparring is vital to a subject’s articulation of socio-economic identity: “Verbal play and trickery also define borders; they impart discrimination in alliances and they pass on prohibitions, building the scaffolding of social identity, and the sense of belonging.”<sup>12</sup> Further, in *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes*

from *Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop*, Kyra D. Gaunt offers an updated and corpo-centric exploration of these issues in a different context, as she demonstrates “how black musical style and behavior are *learned* through oral-kinetic practices that not only teach *an embodied discourse of black music expression*” but also inform a “*discourse about appropriate and transgressive gender and racial roles*” in African American populations.<sup>13</sup> Gaunt inverts the assumed unidirectionality of the flow of influence between African American popular genres and such social practices, claiming that the latter may offer much to the former.



Merrill Garbus and tUnE-yArDs  
Photo from single cover *Wait for a Minute*

Whether tying the music-making practices of children to an urban, contemporary setting to reveal how they articulate gender, race, and identity, or inspecting these practices for their more general socializing capabilities, the above texts help contextualize Garbus’s use of children’s orally transmitted musical practices. Indeed, these youthful expressions are to be found across the entirety of tUnE-yArDs’s modest catalogue and capitalize on the potentialities opened up by articulating Otherness through the playground’s rhythms, repetitions, alacrity, and combativeness.<sup>14</sup> For example, “Find a New Way” opens *Nikki Nack* with a hybrid 8-bit electronic harpsichord rising in arpeggios to a statement of the eponymous phrase. It seems right away that Garbus alludes to the complexities of identity and the drive to reconcile self-conception with outside perception: “Oh, but I trip on the truth when I walk that wire/When you wear a mask, always sound like a liar/I tried to tell him all the reasons that I had to never sing again/And he replied ‘You better find a new way.’” This critique of everyday performativity is multifaceted, as Garbus provides listeners a perspective from which to recognize the multiplicity of their performative selves, especially as they engage gender and sexual orientation.<sup>15</sup>

The jump-rope neologisms through which these themes are filtered—for example, “Oh, change-o, strange-o”/”Nother rearrange-o”—provide a tone of

## tUnE-yArDs Returns (cont.)

jousting and mockery. Embellishing sixteenths in beat three of every other iteration of these lyrics mimic the kind of flagrant jeering that asserts dominance. (Again, we may hear the “Nah-nas” of “My Country” reinterpreted.) Garbus’s delivery of politically charged lyrics as vocalized schoolyard exuberance is reminiscent of the downplayed vocalization of lyrics in the folk/rock of Bob Dylan, who is of course channeling Woody Guthrie. The climactic accretion of textural density *all’improvviso* towards the end of “Find a New Way” offers a sense of teleology not commonly found in the first two albums, however. I find it plausible that this technique—common in EDM and featured on other tracks such as “Water Fountain” and “Time of Dark”—is at least partly the new producers’ voices coming out. The prevalence of choral interjections in all their assonant, soulful glory (“Little white LIES/You rode my SIGHT/When I look into his EYES so”) is also a welcome touch, one that can be found in other tracks such as “Hey Life” (“I don’t KNOW where to GO/But I can’t seem to GO SLOWly, NO).

With its hopscotch feel and clave propulsion, the single “Water Fountain” directly follows. Accompanied by a video akin to a tribal, dance-infused, pastel-colored episode of Pee-Wee’s Playhouse, Brenner’s simple, ostinato bass line holds up syncopated choral exclamations that create a sense of levity and repetitive motion. In this song in particular one really feels transported to the playground, “Miss Mary Mack” hand claps and all. Textures, like conversations, become thickened by the polyphony of overlapping voices and then suddenly dissipate just as quickly as they amassed. Also clearly present here is her penchant for incessantly repeated words or phrases (“A lyrical round-and-roundandroundandround”). Although Garbus invokes the American traditional song “Old Molly Hare,” “Water Fountain” provides a global critique. Garbus reveals, “[“Water Fountain”] is about my anxiety over the collapse of our societal infrastructure and the lack of drinkable water. It’s a childlike chant, but the words are about heavy topics.”<sup>16</sup> “Left Behind” similarly engages a politicized critique of power structures through its text while simultaneously being sonically playful (“Nikki Nikki Nack”/ “We said we wouldn’t let ’em take our soil/ These days don’t it just make your blood boil”).

The juxtaposition of “heavy” lyrics and “childlike” delivery becomes apparent in Garbus’s other children’s

song vernacular, the nursery rhyme. The interlude “Why do we Dine on the Tots?” features Garbus telling a story, “doing all the voices” as if back in her days as a nanny. This Dr. Seuss-like tale recalls the tinny, electronic harpsichord of “Find a New Way,” but with various modes of vocal processing deployed—most obviously vocal doublings at different degrees of asynchrony. The harpsichord and Garbus’s jocular role-playing exist in an anempathetic relationship to the song’s rather terrifying semantic content and the clearly inhuman, erratic modifications of the timbre and repetitions of her voice.

At other times Garbus’s critique emerges from another channel: soul. “Real Thing” drips with sarcasm as it addresses unrealistic ideals of body type (“While you worry about chest size six/They’re winning the tricks/those tricks, those tricks, oh” and “Ugly one be you, who you are”), as well as maintaining a celebrity persona. As she draws out “I’m the real thing” with a chorus in tow, her insolent ridicule of the critical concern over authenticity is foregrounded. This is particularly relevant given her own position as an up-and-coming “indie” star, legitimate talent, and white female appropriator of the music of Africa and the Diaspora. The same tone permeates “Time of Dark,” an open, mixed-meter groove that uses the verse-chorus form to great effect. With verses composed of ten-beat vocal phrases and a chorus in 6/4, Merrill and her chorus belt out and overlap distorted dissonances of defiance.<sup>17</sup>

The album ends with its most overtly critical track, “Manchild.” The song decries complacent attitudes towards sexual assault through a synth warble and a metallic, electronic, patchwork drum ostinato that incorporates intrusive dissonances. The sonic result expresses the filth and brutality of rape. In an interview with *The Village Voice*’s Dan Weiss, Garbus averred, “It does seem so fucking simple, but students are raping girls on college campuses, just things that we can’t believe are still happening. What comes across as like a radical agenda...the radical agenda that girls on college campuses should be protected from rape?”<sup>18</sup> Garbus raps an MIA-infused refrain, “Don’t beat up on my body,” which is laid on top of a sixteen-pulse time-point pattern and is one of the more overt adoptions of the *yanvalu* rhythm she studied in Haiti in preparation of *Nikki Nack*. As the last song on the album, tUnE-yArDs clearly wants this chant-like call-to-arms to serve as an aural after-image.

## tUnE-yArDs Returns (cont.)

Although Garbus and Brenner have created a strong response to *w h o k i l l*, the first half of the album is considerably more packed with memorable moments than the second half, and overall there is not very much new there. *Nikki Nack* is also more lyrically dense than its precursors, but the additional text has little effect on the songs' messages or meanings. It is, however, a good sign that tUnE-yArDs has hardly backed down from the challenge of producing an impressive answer to their "break-through" second album. The frontwoman seems more confident than ever, asserting her professionalism on tour (with sound guys who assume she's inept because she's a woman), shooing off unconstructive criticism, and sticking with other strong female artists like St. Vincent (Annie Clark) who likewise doesn't understand the basis of questions that begin with the phrase, "As a woman, how..." Now a producer, skilled percussionist, vocalist, and songwriter, Garbus, backed by Brenner, will likely continue to enact social and political criticism through the pollyanna, filter-free tone of youthful fun-poking.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "An Interview with Merrill Garbus of tUnE-yArDs (101509) Dedicated Ears Music Blogs," 3 November 2009, video clip, accessed 2 May 2014, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VcnR9iy15fE>.

<sup>2</sup> The unusual typography used for the duo's name and title of the first two albums derives from Garbus's plan to force those who would search for her on the once-thriving Myspace.com to depress additional keys (namely, shift and the space bar) at unpredictable—and thus memorable—times.

<sup>3</sup> Although not technically members of tUnE-yArDs, saxophonists Matt Nelson, Noah Bernstein, and Kasey Knudsen have been fixtures in tUnE-yArDs's live performances since joining the *w h o k i l l* tour in 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Sasha Frere-Jones, "World of Wonder: How Merrill Garbus Left the Theatre and Took the Stage," *The New Yorker*, 2 May 2011, accessed 1 May 2014, [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/musical/2011/05/02/110502crmu\\_music\\_frerejones](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/musical/2011/05/02/110502crmu_music_frerejones).

<sup>5</sup> A great many tUnE-yArDs songs—particularly on *w h o k i l l*—contain the words blood, bleed, or bled. Another recurring theme is water, which we can only speculate emerges from Garbus's extensive experience near it (in Montreal, Oakland, East Africa, and Haiti, for example).

<sup>6</sup> For example, see Caitin White, "Album Review: tUnE-yArDs—Nikki Nack," *Consequence of Sound* Album Reviews, last modified 6 May 2014, <http://consequenceofsound.net/2014/05/album-review-tune-yards-nikki-nack/>.

<sup>7</sup> The most typical sources by far were the LPs made by Colin Turnbull and Simha Arom in the 1960s and 1970s.

<sup>8</sup> Steven Feld, "Pygmy POP: A Genealogy of Schizophonic Mimesis" *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 28 (1996): 26.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> This is evidenced in an interview given at the 2011 Pitchfork Music Festival where Garbus notes, "I think that what's been important to me is just to talk about it and talk about the fact that it is complicated to be a white girl who grew up in an upper-middle class household, with many privileges, a university education, you know, taking this music from cultures that I really know nothing about." See 8:13 of "tUnE-yArDs Backstage at the Pitchfork Music Festival 2011," 15 July 2011, video clip, accessed 3 May 2014, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VcnR9iy15fE>.

<sup>11</sup> Iona Opie and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Language of School Children* (New York: The New York Review of Books, [1959] 2001), ix–x.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., x.

<sup>13</sup> Kyra D. Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 2. Emphasis in original.

<sup>14</sup> One particularly robust illustration of Garbus's tendency to focus on the childhood games of girls can be found in a YouTube clip embedded in a log of her trip to Haiti, which is posted on the website, The Talkhouse. See Merrill Garbus, "Merrill Garbus (Tune-Yards) Talks Haiti and Exploring a Non-Western Musical Tradition," The Talkhouse: Musicians Talk Music" 1 June 2013, accessed 5 May 2014, <http://music.thetalkhouse.com/talks/merrill-garbus-tune-yards-talks-haiti-and-exploring-a-non-western-musical-tradition/>.

<sup>15</sup> The reference to gender construction may be somewhat of a response to Chuck Klosterman's 2012 dismissive review of *w h o k i l l* in which he negligently and egregiously conflates androgyny and asexuality. See Chuck Klosterman, "The Pitfalls of Indie Fame: On tUnE-yArDs and the Perils of Critical Adoration," 27 January 2012, accessed 2 May 2014, <http://grantland.com/features/chuck-klosterman-tune-yards/>. The lyrics "find a new way" may also allude to Garbus's intent to develop stylistically. Under the "about" section, the tUnE-yArDs's Facebook page contains the quotation, "I [Garbus] thought, 'OK, if I'm going to grow as an artist, I need to do this differently'."

<sup>16</sup> Nina Liss-Schultz, "tUnE-yArDs Went to Haiti, and All We Got Was This Brilliant New Album," 28 April 2014, accessed 2 May 2014, <http://www.motherjones.com/mixed-media/2014/04/tune-yards-haiti-nikki-nack-merrill-garbus-water-fountain>.

<sup>17</sup> The fifth track, "Look Around," also establishes a groove outside of the normative pop/rock 4/4 as it slouches in a Spiritualized-ish 9/4.

<sup>18</sup> Dan Weiss, "tUnE-yArDs Uses her Lungs," *The Village Voice*, 7 May 2014, accessed 1 May 2014, <http://www.villagevoice.com/2014-05-07/music/tune-yards-nyc/3/>.



# Whiteness and Sex in the Music of Rosemary Clooney

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Most discussion of popular music after World War II invokes a comparison between the era's mainstream popular music and that which had just been re-christened rhythm & blues, with the former invoked as a dry, sterile music for adults and the latter as a sexualized frenzy. The popular documentary series *The History of Rock and Roll*, produced by Time-Life in 1995 and still frequently broadcast on PBS, makes the argument with the mere juxtaposition of two images: Patti Page serenely singing her hit "Doggie in the Window" to a cocker spaniel, and Little Richard sweatily pounding away on his piano. More analytically, David Brackett once compared the "pedestrian, four-square rhythms" of, again, Patti Page to the "irresistible, syncopated groove" of Ruth Brown. "Which one," he asks, "would *you* rather dance to?"<sup>1</sup>

In popular music, who gets to be sexy, and who does not? Or more specifically, which performers are allowed to not just be attractive, but to inhabit personæ that hint at an embodied sexual explicitness just within reach of her audience? Clearly race is the crucial element in the examples above, and in the usual literature on post-war popular music it has become an essential assumption that "white" music was non-sexual, and "black" music the opposite. Furthermore, certainly one is cool, and one is not. Both Time-Life and Brackett's off-the-cuff remark meld together judgments on race, sex, and coolness. Given the somewhat debatable nature of those judgments—what's so wrong with dancing to a slow country waltz?—it is worth asking what conditions made such judgments so normative they barely need to be spoken.

The sexualization of black performers is the subject of a great deal of literature both scholarly and popular, and so it seems useful tackle the question from the other side. It can be fairly obvious how a performer—and his or her management—play up the sexualized aspect of a persona. Thus conversely, how does one de-sexualize a persona? How does one erase the sweat from a singer's brow, tame the impulse to sway with the music, enforce such serenity under the glare of studio lights? This is, of course, a story of the performance of whiteness and its conflicted relationship with sex.

Specifically, this is a story of the whiteness of women. As our modern music industry slowly coalesced in the wake of World War II, just before the rise of rock and roll in 1955, there was an interesting phenomenon. Already the preceding decade had seen the transformation of the great dance bands into the smaller, more commercially viable acts oriented around singers such as Frank Sinatra. In this first wave, a few women made a name for themselves: Jo Stafford and Dinah Shore can both be found on the Top 10 list of bestselling artists in 1947. By 1954, however, there were four women on that same list, and a number of others just below. In the historiography of rock and roll that needs its reactionary op-



Rosemary Clooney  
Courtesy of Michael Ochs Archives

posite, it isn't Eddie Fisher or Perry Como who fills that role—or the equally tame R&B vocal groups also lurking on the charts—but these so-called girl singers: Patti Page, Doris Day, and Rosemary Clooney. At a moment when whiteness itself was undergoing both expansion and transformation, these women bore the burden of that new whiteness while also negotiating the post-war domestic turn. The results were anything but pedestrian, and highly revealing of the racial logic of sex and performance.

## The Music of Rosemary Clooney (cont.)

While all of these singers deserve more scholarly treatment than they have yet received, a brief example of one such career can be a starting point to a few important observations. Raised in Kentucky by her Irish grandparents after her parents divorced, Rosemary Clooney followed a well-trodden path into musical stardom: early success singing jingles for a local radio station, in her case the same station—WLW in Cincinnati—that had launched Doris Day (*née* Kapellhoff) a few years earlier. In 1945 this led to a touring engagement with the Tony Pastor Band, as one of the Clooney Sisters. By the time the Pastor Orchestra arrived in New York City in 1948, Rosemary had matured enough to continue on her own and signed with Columbia Records under the management of legendary impresario Mitch Miller.

Rosemary had her first hit in January in 1951 with “Beautiful Brown Eyes,” which sold a respectable 400,000 copies. Her greatest success, however, came in July of that same year, when she recorded “Come on-a My House,” under the direction of Miller. Famously, Rosemary had wanted none of it, envisioning a career of more genteel love songs instead of this “weird novelty fluff,” as she called it. The song was based upon an Armenian folk song, and had been penned a decade earlier by two recent Armenian immigrants: William Saroyan, the playwright and author of *The Human Comedy* who famously refused a Pulitzer Prize because it was too tainted with commerce, and his cousin Ross Bagdasarian, even more famous for creating, under the name David Seville, Alvin and the Chipmunks.

Mitch Miller was a great fan of the novelty song, and he rightly predicted that Rosemary’s exuberant personality could handle the most outlandish of songs and of arrangements, in this case for jazz harpsichord. A harpsichord was borrowed from Juilliard and the pianist Stan Freeman was drafted to play it despite no prior experience. The resulting song was an overwhelming success, staying at number one on the pop charts for eight weeks. The lyrics are a surrealistic mixture of fairy tale and sexual innuendo:

Come on-a my house my house, I’m gonna give you candy  
Come on-a my house, my house, I’m gonna give a-you  
Apple-a plum and a apricot-a too eh  
Come on-a my house, my house-a come on

Come on-a my house, my house-a come on  
Come on-a my house, my house I’m gonna give a you  
Figs and dates and grapes and cakes eh!

Bagdasarian and Saroyan’s song, composed for their unsuccessful off-Broadway musical *The Son*, is actually written from the point of view of a “lonely immigrant boy.” In a slow introduction left out by Clooney and Miller, the boy is going home from work when he spies a “fine U.S. number-one girlie” and falls in love with her. Unsure how to approach her, he speaks to her “in old-country way,” which leads into the chorus of “Come on-a my house.” In the original version, the song ends with the boy singing “Come on-a my house-a, all-a your life, come on, come on and-a be my wife.”

Armenian folk tale or not, the image evoked in Miller’s version of the song is a sirenic Hansel and Gretel, with Clooney cast as a particularly seductive witch luring the listener into her food-laden house. Whereas the original Armenian boy asked the listener to be his wife, Clooney ends the song by promising us in a throaty voice that if we come into her house, she’ll give us “everything.” She chants this word three times, before ending on a coquettish exclamation of “Come on-a my house!” Although other versions of this song recorded by artists from Della Reese (1952) to Madonna (2002) have emphasized the seductive, as crooned by Clooney over the clattering plectra, “Come on-a My House” is equal parts sexuality and menace, even implying that the two might be one and the same.

Seductiveness was quite easy to achieve thanks to Clooney’s personal charms, but analyzing this atmosphere of menace is more involved. Consider, for instance, the complete lack of contrasting material. Most pop songs of this period followed traditional Tin Pan Alley structures, especially the classic thirty-two bar AABA or ABAB verse-chorus arrangements. The only other hit song of 1951 to lack a strongly contrasting B section was a traditional number from a completely different time, the Weavers’ strophic folk song “On Top of Old Smoky.” With the slow intro stripped out of “Come on-a My House,” the only break from Clooney’s voice is provided by the harpsichord solo, which riffs on the same material. The reverberations of the echo chamber used

## The Music of Rosemary Clooney (cont.)

in the recording further destabilize the listener, adding ambience but also emphasizing the already slippery cross rhythms of the vocal line. When the harpsichord solo comes, it feels as if the machine is beginning to break down. Closely miked and clumsily played, Freeman's harpsichord break sounds on the edge of breakdown. As he attempts faster and faster figuration, melodic content fades into the sound of overworked plec-tra clacking away.

The putatively Armenian dialect of "Come on-a My House" was heard by most contemporary listeners as Italian, an impression assisted by Clooney's later hits such as "Botch-A-Me (Ba-ba-baciami Piccina)," a cover of an Italian pop song that spent seventeen weeks on the charts in 1952, and "Mambo Italiano," which charted for twelve weeks in 1954. Given her ambiguous last name, many listeners assumed that Clooney was herself Italian. In addition, her (two) marriages to Puerto Rican actor José Ferrer added a *frisson* of ethnicity to Clooney's popular image. Her first major movie role was in *The Stars Are Singing* (1953), a musical farce that lightly thematized the confusions of ethnic assimilation in the wake of the McCarran-Walter Immigration Act of 1952: the protagonist is teenaged Polish immigrant Katri Walenski (played, in true Hollywood melting-pot fashion, by Italian actress Anna Maria Alberghetti) living illegally in the United States while trying to break into show business. She lives in a Greenwich Village tenement full of other Broadway hopefuls, including Clooney, who plays herself as Irish-American pop singer "Terry Brennan," even singing a version of "Come on-a My House." Walenski eventually wins a televised amateur contest singing under the assumed name "Mamie Jones." In the process, however, she is revealed as an illegal alien and is arrested along with most of her friends—with the exception of Clooney, whose blonde good looks keeps her out of trouble. None other than President Eisenhower saves the day, moved by public outcry to grant Walenski a last-minute residency permit.

This was indeed the state of whiteness in the 1950s, as the "melting pot" metaphor seemed, at least to some ethnic communities, to be a reality. The McCarran-Walter Immigration Act established a system in which each European country was given an annual

quota of immigrants equal to one-sixth of one percent of citizens in the United States whose ancestry derived from that country, based on the 1920 census. More immediately, however, the mass migration of many Americans into middle-class suburbs effectively destroyed the institutions of cultural cohesion that had long allowed immigrants in urban areas to retain a sense of identity. It was a moment the historian Richard Alba has called "the twilight of ethnicity."<sup>2</sup> The moment was short-lived, to be sure, and by the early 1960s critics such as Daniel P. Moynihan began to speak of the "unmeltable ethnics."<sup>3</sup> But in the 1950s, ethnicity—at least for some descendants of European immigrants—seemed determined to fade.

A generation earlier, Clooney's persona would have found a comfortable niche in a venerable ethnic novelty song tradition. An Irish performer singing an Armenian song in an Italian accent bears an obvious debt to earlier performers like Blanche Ring and Sophie Tucker, who in 1928 could famously sing a line like "My mother is Jewish/my father is Irish/Which proves that I'm Spanish." The ethnic novelty song, however, went into steep decline after World War II, when the surge in assimilation made it difficult to find a market for unmeltablely ethnic music. Josh Kun has written movingly about this process in his book *Audiotopia*.<sup>4</sup> Although Jewish comedians like Milton Berle and George Burns were tremendously popular in the early days of television, Kun points out that overt performance of Jewishness died out almost overnight. Kun memorializes singer and clarinetist Mickey Katz, who made his living with Yiddish parody versions of pop songs—he did one of "Come on-a My House"—and live performances that often featured klezmer hoedowns midway through a song. Katz's insistence on remaining unassimilated resulted in widespread rejection by the Jewish community in the 1950s.

How then, did Clooney succeed with these "outdated" ethnic novelty songs? Simply by virtue of her distance from them. Unlike the "too-Jewish" Katz, blonde, blue-eyed Rosemary Clooney performed ethnicity from an ironic distance. Raised poor in a southern Midwestern town, her career goal was to become an urbane performer of jazz standards, a goal reached when her sentimental version of "Hey There" hit number one in 1954. Even as audiences appreciat-



## The Music of Rosemary Clooney (cont.)

ed the zany antics of “Come on-a My House” and the other novelty songs, they understood that her music was simply playing with signifiers of ethnicity, not actually inhabiting them—that she was really just white. This is made clear on the very first episode of *The Rosemary Clooney Show*, which premiered in 1955. The musical number of this show was a montage of “Come on-a My House” with “Mambo Italiano” and a version of the old Rat Pack standard “Love and Marriage.” Exoticisms abound, with Clooney wearing a garish striped dress and pointing seductively at baskets of fruit. However, the baskets of fruit and other elements of the Italianesque set are not naturalistically presented; they are large cartoon mock-ups, obviously empty underneath. Clooney’s 1950s pop career shows that not only was white ethnicity made invisible, it had become so thoroughly detached from corporeal reality that it could become nothing more than a harmless play of signifiers.

There was one lingering after-effect of this playfully performative ethnicity, however, and it allowed Clooney to distinguish herself from the even whiter Patti Page and Doris Day. Unlike her peers, Clooney utilized a slightly more sexually explicit persona. For Page and Day, their sexuality had to be spoken silently by their bodies; their music hardly broached the subject. Clooney, as in the songs just discussed, was able to at least wield an occasional double-entendre in a winking fashion. It might useful to think her particular kind of sexualization in the context of Anne Helen Petersen’s recent *Buzzfeed* essay on the Hollywood “Cool Girl.”<sup>5</sup> Taking Jennifer Lawrence as her starting point, Petersen theorizes a star type that is at once “one of the guys” while remaining both sexually appealing and, crucially, figured as sexually available. Her genealogy stretches back from Lawrence to Jane Fonda, to Carole Lombard, to Clara Bow. It’s important to note that Petersen’s timeline actually skips the 1950s. While surely not intended to be comprehensive, it’s not a coincidence. The “Cool Girl” is distinctly not possible in the immediate post-war aesthetic, at least not for white performers.

Clooney, however, comes close, and it was precisely her ethnic play that allowed her to do so. Page would be forever linked to her slow country-waltzes, of which Brackett’s “pedestrian”

epithet is not a fair description, but they do determinedly resist any kind of sexualization. And Day would famously embark upon a series of film roles that would transform the star into one of the most famously virginal personae in popular culture. The de-sexualization of those two stars’ careers needs more attention than this short essay can provide, but suffice it to say, perhaps they represent a kind of aspirational whiteness impossible to separate from the immediate post-war domestic turn. Clooney’s career in the 1950s, on the other hand, despite its winking parody of the old ethnic novelty song, still retained just enough of that racialized difference to allow for a small window of performed sexuality. One needs only recall Miley Cyrus’s recent adventures to see how this technique still resonates with many white performers today, but its rarity and occasional incomprehensibility in the 1950s is a testament to the power of whiteness in that influential period, especially when it came to sex.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Brackett, David. “Review of Race, Rock, and Elvis, by Michael T. Bertrand.” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 57, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 215–21.

<sup>2</sup> Alba, Richard D. *Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Novak, Michael. *Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in American Life*. New York: Macmillan, 1972.

<sup>4</sup> Kun, Josh. *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Petersen, Anne Helen. “Jennifer Lawrence and the History of Cool Girls.” *BuzzFeed*, February 28, 2014. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/annehelenpetersen/jennifer-lawrence-and-the-history-of-cool-girls>.

# Busted for Her Beauty: *Hair*'s Female Characters<sup>1</sup>

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When it opened on Broadway at the Biltmore Theatre on 29 April 1968, *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* was hailed by critics and historians as paradigm shifting. While a few critics dismissed the musical as loud, chaotic and confusing, most wrote glowingly of its energy, its ability to harness the commercial potential of the theatrical mainstream to the experimentalism taking place off Broadway, and its disarmingly affectionate depiction of a frequently misunderstood or maligned subculture. Perhaps more importantly, *Hair* was heralded for managing to do what had been deemed impossible: it brought rock music to Broadway in a way that didn't offend young audiences and didn't alienate older ones. "This is a happy show musically," Clive Barnes enthused in *The New York Times*. "[*Hair*] is the first Broadway musical in some time to have the authentic voice of today rather than the day before yesterday."<sup>2</sup>

Reception histories about *Hair* remain overwhelmingly focused on the show's many innovations,<sup>3</sup> which I have no intention of debating here; I believe *Hair* deserves its landmark status. Nevertheless, it has long bothered me that this musical, like the era it came from, tends to be remembered so romantically and uncritically. One aspect of *Hair* that I find particularly unsettling is a case in point: despite its left-leaning approach to the many social and political issues it tackles, *Hair* is jarringly old-fashioned in its depictions of women, which no previous scholarship on the musical has examined in depth. Its sexism, however, helps shed light on the time and place *Hair* came from.

While *Hair* became a household name as a Broadway show, it was nurtured primarily Off Off Broadway. The musical was the brainchild of Jerome Ragni (1935-91) and James Rado (1932-), two professional actors who, by the mid-1960s, had turned their backs on Broadway in search of riskier, more experimental work in the fringe.<sup>4</sup> The men met when they were cast in the anti-capital punishment musical

*Hang Down Your Head and Die*, which opened (and closed) Off Broadway on 18 October 1964. Two years later, they worked together on *Viet Rock*, a collaborative anti-war piece at the Open Theater Off Off Broadway.

Between rehearsals, Ragni and Rado hung around the Village, participating in the neighborhood's vibrant hippie scene, which they decided to use as material for a musical. They rented an apartment in Hoboken, New Jersey, and between acting jobs developed a script about two men based loosely on themselves: Claude—



*Hair: Original 1968 production*  
Courtesy of Getty Images

a brooding dreamer from Flushing, Queens—was based on Rado, while Berger—a charismatic high-school dropout and leader of the tribe of hippies with whom Claude socializes—was based on Ragni. Presented as a series of interconnected vignettes, *Hair* follows Claude as he wrestles over whether he should go to Vietnam to please his parents, or burn his draft card and stay with his hippie friends. He eventu-

ally chooses Vietnam, where he is killed; *Hair* ends as his friends mourn his death and celebrate his life.

Once they had completed a draft, Ragni and Rado began to shop *Hair* around to producers. After countless rejections, they met Joseph Papp, who chose their musical to be the inaugural production of the new Public Theater, which was moving into the abandoned Astor Library on Lafayette Street in the East Village. Conditions were that Rado and Ragni cut their lengthy script, and that they find a composer to write an acceptable score. A mutual friend introduced them to the Canadian composer Galt MacDermot, who had recently moved to New York, and plans for a limited run at the Public beginning in October 1967 commenced.

While at the Public, *Hair* caught the attention of Michael Butler, a Chicago businessman who secured the rights to the musical once the Public let them expire. Butler moved *Hair* to an abandoned discotheque,

## Busted for Her Beauty (cont.)

the Cheetah, in December 1967, and set about finding a Broadway house for an open-ended run. The Cheetah run ended in January 1968, and Butler announced that *Hair* would reopen at the Biltmore on Broadway that May.

For its leap to Broadway, *Hair* was revised and recast, and the experimental director Tom O'Horgan was hired to oversee the transition. Under O'Horgan, *Hair* retained a distinct Off Off Broadway sensibility, both behind the scenes and on the stage. O'Horgan employed non-traditional casting, bringing in seasoned experimental actors and amateurs who struck him as talented and appealingly raw. The cast and creative team worked collectively and improvisatorially during rehearsals to build trust, rework the script, and stage musical numbers. Among the show's many innovations were its highly disjunct structure, frequent disregard of the imaginary fourth wall that divides spectators from performers, infamous use of stage nudity, and emphasis on collaboration and communality.

When it reopened on Broadway, then, *Hair* was noted for its liberal approach to sociopolitical issues—race, class, colonialism, the environment, the generation gap, youth culture, the Vietnam war, (male) homosexuality—but also for its liberal approach to theater-making. Yet *Hair*'s liberalism contrasts bluntly with its conservative treatment of women.

While the second wave of feminism is often associated with the sociopolitical upheavals of the 1960s, it did not become a mainstream movement until the 1970s; the sexism inherent in 1960s youth culture was rampant and has been well-documented.<sup>5</sup> *Hair* touches on myriad social issues, but feminism had yet to rear its head as a hot-button issue in 1968. As a result, for all its innovations and its promulgation of queer performativity, Off Off Broadway was fairly traditional when it came to sexual politics. The movement took root well before the second wave; a vast majority of plays produced on the fringe were written and directed by men, and very few collectives made much effort to promote work by female playwrights.<sup>6</sup> *Hair* thus neatly, if inadvertently, sums up the sexism inherent in both the counterculture and the contemporaneous Off Off Broadway scene. The sexism in these institutions is reflected in *Hair* where, almost to a character, the women are secondary to the men.

Claude and Berger are *Hair*'s most three-dimensional characters, and their relationship provides the show's emotional trajectory. The connection between Claude and Berger is so central, in fact, that *Hair* can be easily read as a love story between them. This is no accident, since Rado and Ragni not only based Claude and Berger on themselves and originated their respective roles in the Broadway production, but had become romantically involved while writing the show.<sup>7</sup>

Their relationship was an open secret for decades until Rado described Ragni as the love of his life in a 2009 interview with *The Advocate*. *Hair*, Rado explains, was “about men loving each other as opposed to fighting each other.”<sup>8</sup> The relationship between Claude and Berger was not merely autobiographical, however, but reflective of the hippie scene, which Rado remembers as being profoundly liberating. “There was a wonderful warmth in the hippie atmosphere, a sense of freedom,” he remembered. “Men would just come up to you and take you in their arms, and it was so freeing and felt so good.” Rado and Ragni made a point of emphasizing “very strong male relationships” in *Hair*: “Claude and Berger have a strong tie, but Berger has this sidekick, Woof, and Woof has his sidekick. There's a whole bunch of male relationships in addition to the traditional male-female love stories.”<sup>9</sup> Yet while *Hair*'s male characters were drawn from the inside out, its female characters were drawn from the outside in.

The women in *Hair*, despite different character traits, are all motivated by romantic designs on men; when women are mentioned in song, they are almost inevitably sexualized or objectified. Take, for example, Berger's first number, “Donna,” in which he emphasizes his sexual prowess by singing of his lustful search for “a sixteen-year-old virgin”:

Have you seen my sixteen-year-old tattooed woman  
Heard a story she got busted for her beauty  
....  
And I'm gonna show her life on Earth can be sweet  
Gonna lay my mutated self at her feet  
And I'm gonna love her make love to her  
Till the sky turns brown  
And I'm evolving  
I'm evolving through the drugs  
That you put down<sup>10</sup>



## Busted for Her Beauty (cont.)

This number segues directly into “Hashish,” which is followed by “Sodomy.” Taken as a threesome, the numbers help quickly educate the audience about the hippies’ stance on sex and drugs, but “Donna” also inadvertently sets the tone for the masculine bent that the rest of the show takes. When the female characters are introduced, it soon becomes apparent that they, too, are treated primarily as love interests, sexual objects, or both.

The audience learns the least about Crissy, the placid flower child whose solo number, “Frank Mills,” describes her infatuation with a boy she met in front of the Waverly Theater before, “unfortunately, [she] lost his address.”<sup>11</sup> She remains in front of the theater for most of the show, awaiting his unlikely return. Jeanie, a pregnant acid casualty who sings “Air,” is in love with Claude, who in turn pines for Sheila Franklin, a freshman at NYU. “This is the way it is,” Jeanie tells the audience. “I’m hung up on Claude. Sheila’s hung up on Berger. Berger is hung up everywhere. Claude is hung up on a cross over Sheila and Berger.”<sup>12</sup>

Sheila, the sole representative of the New Left featured in *Hair*’s hippie-heavy script, is aware of Claude’s feelings, but loves (and sleeps with) Berger. When she is introduced midway through Act I, Sheila has just returned from an anti-war protest in Washington, D.C. Yet for all her independence and intelligence, Sheila’s main purpose in *Hair* is to complete a love triangle—a classic plot device, for all of *Hair*’s innovations—and intensify the musical’s “central love relationship”: that between Claude and Berger.<sup>13</sup>

Sheila’s function is especially obvious in the earliest version of *Hair*, which changed significantly before its Broadway opening. In the original version, Berger decides that Sheila should have sex with Claude before he goes to war. Berger thus repeatedly attempts to convince Sheila that sex with Claude is her obligation, and his right. At one point, Berger promises Sheila that if “you do it tonight with Claude[,] I’ll do it tomorrow night with you,”<sup>14</sup> and informs her that if she refuses to help with “the greatest going-away gift we can give our friend,” she’ll anger Berger.<sup>15</sup> The scholar Stephen Bottoms notes that in treating Sheila as an object Berger intends to give Claude as a present, *Hair* “staged a bizarre variant on the age-old patriarchal right of men to use and trade women as if they are property.”<sup>16</sup>

Berger’s physical and emotional control of Sheila is demonstrated in their first scene together, during which he ritualistically rapes her. Couched in experimental theater techniques, Berger’s attack is nevertheless treated as something he has every right to do. Having just returned from Washington, Sheila is greeted enthusiastically by Hud, Woof, and Claude. Although Berger is chillier, Sheila gives him a yellow satin shirt she bought while away. Berger mocks the gift, and when Sheila asks him to stop, he launches into a tirade that plays on female stereotypes: “Don’t tell me to stop. You always do that. You don’t allow me to have any friends, you’re jealous, suspicious, you use the double standard, you . . . spy on me, you . . . won’t allow me to be myself, you follow me, you’re always picking a fight, and then you expect me to love you . . . well, I can’t have sex that way . . . ! That’s the last thing I’d want . . .”<sup>17</sup>

Hurt by his reaction, Sheila again asks Berger to try on the shirt, and this time he responds violently. Here, the script originally designates that Berger, while chanting a stream of gibberish, has Woof “get on top of Sheila, screwing her”: “Berger collapses onto Woof’s sleeping bag, as though he has just expended himself in an orgasm . . . Berger has just fucked Sheila in public. Or rather *raped* her in public. . . . She was fighting him off and reacts to his attack.”<sup>18</sup> The stage directions then describe Sheila as “in shock,” but the action continues around her as if nothing extraordinary has happened; focus merely shifts from the way Berger feels about Sheila to the way Claude feels about her.<sup>19</sup>

This scene became an inaccurate gauge of the musical once *Hair* was revised for its Broadway run. While the yellow shirt remains an important part of the scene, intimations of Sheila’s rape were excised. Nevertheless, Berger’s treatment of Sheila still implies that he controls their relationship.

In the Biltmore production and subsequent revivals, Sheila still enters and is greeted by Claude, Hud, and Woof midway through Act I. She gives Berger the shirt, and although he obviously dislikes it and delivers the “Don’t tell me to stop” monologue cited above, he stops short of raping her. Instead, he slaps her, rips the shirt, and stalks offstage.<sup>20</sup> Heartbroken, Sheila launches into the torch song “Easy to Be Hard,” during which she expounds on her frustrations with

## Busted for Her Beauty (cont.)

Berger, who, she clearly feels, is more interested in being a hippie tribe-leader than he is in one-on-one relationships:

How can people be so heartless  
You know I'm hung up on you  
Easy to give in  
Easy to help out  
And especially people  
Who care about strangers  
Who say they care about social injustice  
Do you only  
Care about the bleeding crowd  
How about a needing friend?  
I need a friend<sup>21</sup>

Presumably upon hearing Sheila air her frustrations about him, Berger returns to embrace her in apology when she finishes singing. He holds her until he notices Claude nearby, whereupon he slinks back offstage, thereby saving face in front of his buddy.<sup>22</sup>

The resolution of the Berger-Claude-Sheila love triangle is also softened somewhat in the move to Broadway. Although he still suggests it, Berger eases up considerably in encouraging Sheila to bed Claude, and Sheila no longer consents as she did in the original script. Instead, the tribe celebrates Claude's last night before induction by tripping on acid, and Claude's hallucinations make up a large section of Act II. On the morning of Claude's departure, the tribe finds that he has disappeared. Berger and Sheila lead a frantic search for him. He reenters in uniform, his shaggy hair shorn. "I'm right here," he tells his friends, who cannot hear or see him. "Like it or not, they got me."<sup>23</sup> Claude retreats from view after singing the opening lines from the final number, "The Flesh Failures (Let the Sun Shine In)." The cast takes over, eventually parting to reveal Claude lying lifeless at center stage. As the lights fade, the tribe exits, leav-

ing Berger to dance alone around Claude's body.

The changes made to *Hair* between the Public and Broadway productions certainly benefited its characters. Sheila, no longer treated primarily as Berger's plaything, is if not exactly empowered, at least no longer pressured as frequently or aggressively for sexual favors. This, along with her added number, the soul-baring, emotionally raw "Easy to Be Hard," makes her seem somewhat more three-dimensional. Meanwhile, Berger seems less a violent brute than merely a petulant child.

Nevertheless, *Hair* remains a musical about men and men's concerns. Sheila may represent the New Left and the rapidly changing woman in a way that no other character does, but she ultimately functions as the central love-interest, either adoring (Berger) or existing to be adored (by Claude). Claude's conflicts dominate the piece, while Berger, who remains "true to the hippie ethos," emerges as *Hair*'s true hero.<sup>24</sup>



Annabel Leventon and Oliver Tobias during rehearsals for *Hair* at the Shaftesbury Theatre in London in 1968

Courtesy of MailOnline.uk

Original Broadway castmember Natalie Mosco remembers taking issue with the sexism in *Hair*, even back in 1968: "Sheila was treated like the daytripper. Like she was coming in trying to be cool but she wasn't really. . . this, by the way, is a very big problem I had with *Hair*: the treatment of women. You know, 'She's my old lady!' 'Don't be so uptight!' 'You're so hung up!' The guys could go around doing anything they wanted! [But] the way they talked to Sheila?" Mosco was aware that women were not at the heart of the production. "It was a male point of view," she argues, "because they were the ones being sent [to Vietnam], and the girls weren't. The women—it was not our

culture that was being reflected."<sup>25</sup> While Mosco might not have been the only person to notice *Hair*'s emphasis on men, her comments are largely unique; no reviews, articles, or books on *Hair* seem to focus on its sexism.<sup>26</sup>

## Busted for Her Beauty (cont.)

As a reflection of contemporary youth culture, then, *Hair* was somewhat accurate, if also likely inadvertent, in its conservative treatment of women. This should not take away from its many innovations. *Hair* was, after all, written by two men who, in the process of writing about contemporary political issues, had fallen in love with one another. While progressive about a lot of issues, Rado and Ragni's musical reflects a sexism that, long prevalent in the dominant culture, existed in the youth culture of the 1960s as well. While there is no reason to stop celebrating *Hair*'s many innovations, its shortcomings, too, serve as an important link to the musical's place and time.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is drawn from sections of my books *The Theater Will Rock: A History of the Rock Musical from Hair to Hedwig* (University of Michigan Press, 2006) and *Hard Times: The Adult Musical in 1970s New York City* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Clive Barnes, "Hair: It's Fresh and Frank." *The New York Times*, 30 April 1968.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Barbara Lee Horn's *The Age of Hair: Evolution and Impact of Broadway's First Rock Musical* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), Scott Miller's *Let the Sun Shine In: The Genius of Hair* (New York: Heinemann Drama, 2013), and Eric Grode's *Hair: The Story of the Show That Defined a Generation* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Off and especially Off Off Broadway were centers for theatrical experimentation in New York. Off Broadway developed through the 1950s as a smaller, less expensive alternative to Broadway. As it became increasingly commercial through the early 1960s, the even-more-experimental Off Off Broadway movement was born.

<sup>5</sup> For just a few examples, see Gail Collins, *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009); Alice Echols, "Nothing Distant About It: Women's Liberation and Sixties Radicalism," in *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, ed. David Farber (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 149-174; Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, "Rock and Sexuality," in *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, eds. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodman, (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 371-389; and Rebecca E. Klatch, "The Formation of Feminist Consciousness Among Left- and Right-Wing Activists of the 1960s," *Gender and Society* 15, no. 6 (December 2001): 791-815.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen J. Bottoms. *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 120.

<sup>7</sup> Sheela Lambert. "The Man Behind the Hair." *The Advocate*, 13 August 2008. <http://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/theater/2008/08/13/man-behind-hair>. Accessed 7 April 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Gerome Ragni and James Rado. *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical*. Production script, N.d., 4.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 48-49.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>13</sup> Lambert, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Ragni and Rado, *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* (New York: Pocket Books, 1966), 130. This exchange remained in the Diane Paulus revival.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 127, 131.

<sup>16</sup> Bottoms, 212.

<sup>17</sup> Ragni and Rado, 1966, 77-78.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 78-79.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 94-95.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 42-43. Paulus's revival omitted the slap.

<sup>21</sup> Ragni and Rado, *Hair* production script, 43-44.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>23</sup> Horn, 1991: 79.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>25</sup> Personal communication, 3 January 1999.

<sup>26</sup> Hilton Als mentions sexism in passing in his *New Yorker* review of Diane Paulus's revival of *Hair* in April 2009, but the focus of his review is on the treatment in the show of black characters, and specifically Hud. [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/theatre/2009/04/13/090413crth\\_theatre\\_als](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/theatre/2009/04/13/090413crth_theatre_als) Accessed 3 June 2014.



# Once Again, on the Music of Laurie Anderson's "O Superman (for Massenet)"

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Back in 1991, Susan McClary argued that Laurie Anderson's music deserves analytical attention.<sup>1</sup> Aside from McClary's own remarks on the subject, to which I will return below, her call to action remains unanswered. Typically, academic writing on Anderson's performative electronic storytelling has not explicitly addressed musical characteristics. Instead, her pieces are generally viewed as postmodern performance, video, or multimedia art, and analyses have focused on (hyper)mediation, the technological fragmentation of the subject, politicized language games and multiplicities of textual meaning, Anderson's androgynous/cyborg performance personæ, and the ability of her production to transgress institutionalized high/low cultural and genre boundaries.<sup>2</sup> Jon McKenzie posits Anderson's oeuvre as an "idiosyncratic collection of words, sounds, gestures, and images downloaded from various social archives, especially that of the United States."<sup>3</sup> Noting that the reception and production of Anderson's works move within and between the territories of popular culture and experimental art, McKenzie argues that Anderson's mediated evocations of "everyday life and its electronic ghost" are able to "cut across three terrains of performance: cultural, technological, and bureaucratic."<sup>4</sup> In terms of the bureaucratic arena—the economic realm of bottom lines, synergy, and optimization—McKenzie understands Anderson's popular culture associations not as indicating a sell-out, but as enacting a quintessentially postmodern gesture of unfolding new performative language games that are "not only games of knowledge and power, of big science and little men, but also of adaptors, resisters, No Bodies."<sup>5</sup>

Philip Auslander, too, defends Anderson against the slanderous accusation of selling out, arguing that her postmodern performance art problematizes its own means of technologized representation by fully accepting the pervasive sense of alterity arising from acts of disembodied communication, which are prevalent in mass-mediated society.<sup>6</sup> Discussing Spalding Grey and Anderson—two "downtown" artists who were able to "'cross-over' from vanguard to mass cultural status" in the 1980s—Auslander maintains that this crossover does not indicate a mainstreaming or watering down of the vanguard.<sup>7</sup> Instead, he suggests that for these performance artists, "mass culture itself has emerged as a site of possible resistance to the mainstream."<sup>8</sup>

The reception history of "O Superman" is certainly implicated in the ideological concern over selling out evident in the articles by McKenzie and Auslander. Anderson's eight-and-a-half-minute song was initially part of her large-scale live performance art opus *United States*, and the music video for the song—which is now on permanent exhibition at MOMA—closely follows its staged presentation.<sup>9</sup> The track was recorded in 1981 under a contract with the major corporate label Warner Brothers and subsequently released both as a single and on Anderson's 1982 album *Big Science*. While reception in the United States was aligned with Anderson's position as an avant-garde performance artist, "O Superman" spent six weeks on the UK Singles Chart, reaching a peak position of number two in October 1981.<sup>10</sup> As RoseLee Goldberg states in her biography of Anderson, "such a leap into the mainstream was unimaginable before that time, and for an avant-garde artist it was considered something of a contradiction."<sup>11</sup> Following McKenzie and Auslander, I want to investigate what is productive in this contradiction, considering especially how Anderson traces lines of flight away from the dominant discourses of both popular/mainstream and experimental/new/avant composition by becoming a technologically masterful female composer/performer. While the computerization of popular music in the 1980s is generally seen as excluding women, Anderson's work consistently challenges the alignment of masculinity with technological expertise and the cinematic place of women as objects of the male gaze.<sup>12</sup> Further, I want to stop worrying about selling out, which is a concept so indebted to that illusive notion of (white, male) authenticity that it is hardly worth debating whether or not mainstreamed recording artists have sold out.<sup>13</sup>



Laurie Anderson  
Courtesy of Warner Bros

Investigations of Anderson's music can be invigorated by hearing musical characteristics that facilitate this deterritorializing genre crossover and by determin-

## Anderson's "O Superman (for Massenet)" (cont.)

ing analytical approaches that may provide insight into perceivers' experiences of Anderson's performative musical idiolect. In an attempt to reopen the discussion McClary started over twenty years ago, this essay provides some analytical remarks on the music of "O Superman (for Massenet)." Though Anderson's music is central in this discussion, I maintain that analysts should keep in mind that "when the same object is available in several mediated forms"—in the case of "O Superman," as live performance art piece, music video, video installation, single, and track on *Big Science* and *United States Live* (also on Warner Brothers, 1983)—"the meaning of each one as an experience is likely to derive from its relation to another."<sup>14</sup> The interaction of these multiple versions has continuously referred me back to the musical aspects I address here, which include melodic content and issues surrounding rhythm and meter.

McClary's chapter on Anderson illustrates that analytical methods centered on tonality—namely Roman numeral analysis and its Schenkerian companion—offer little insight into the harmonic or melodic operations of "O Superman." Viewing this non-compliance with hegemonic methods of Western music theory as deconstructive, McClary aptly notes that "O Superman" "is in some ways like a performed-out analytical reduction" because it offers us "only the binaries that underlie and inform the more [harmonically] complex narratives of the tonal repertory."<sup>15</sup> The harmonic attribute to which McClary refers is the synthesized chordal content of Anderson's single, which consists of the alternation between first-inversion A-flat major



Example 1: Parsimonious voice leading in chordal content

and root position C minor triads (Example 1). For McClary, the triadic structure of "O Superman" suggests that a tonal analysis of the piece could prove fitting, but "even though we are given only two closely related triads, it is difficult to ascertain which is structural and which ornamental;" we are unable to establish a hierarchy of keys.<sup>16</sup> Moving forward from these observations, the parsimonious voice leading engendered by this juxtaposition of chords can be seen as a composi-

tional device that facilitates the song's ambivalent melodic and rhythmic propulsion. Furthermore, given the scarcity of clearly voiced and articulated chords in "O Superman," an investigation of *melodic* pitch content and contour seems appropriate.

The texture of "O Superman" is generally sparse. A looped recording of Anderson vocalizing the syllable "ha" on middle C provides an unwavering rhythmic pulse; this loop is both the first and last thing we hear, and it continues throughout. Other musical elements—which include synthesized ostinati and droning chords, *musique concrète* chirping birds, and Anderson singing/speaking into a vocoder—unfold in relation to this background pulse. After nineteen beats on "ha," Anderson enters with the melody in Example 2.<sup>17</sup> This melody includes two motives that recur in other contexts throughout the song: the octave leap up on A-flat and the rhythmically disorienting move from G to



Example 2: Opening melody (0:08-0:35)

A-flat, which occur in the third system of Example 2. Notably, both of these motives play into an ambiguity of key, dwelling on the single pitch difference between C minor and A-flat major triads. The lack of D or D-flat in this melody further prevents a designation of key.

Interplay between A-flat/G is also evident in an ostinato pattern that occurs twice, the first time monophonically (as in Example 3) and the second time looped in canon with itself and in varying octaves. This ostinato also evidences Anderson's use of an additive (/subtractive) musical process, a device characteristic of downtown minimalist music.<sup>18</sup> By altering the number of alternations between E-flat and G in each repetition of this figure, Anderson maintains "the same gen-

## Anderson's "O Superman (for Massenet)" (cont.)

eral melodic configuration," but through the addition or subtraction of two notes, its "rhythmic shape" is differentiated.<sup>19</sup> This differentiation metrically works itself out with

the last repetition, but the expansion/contraction

in mm. 2–3 momentarily throws off the placement of the downbeat by having the third repetition begin on a weak beat (marked with \* in Example 3). This would be true even if the meter were understood as 2/4 rather than 4/4. A similar play on metric assumptions occurs in the last phrase of the melody in Example 2, where the final repeated G, which falls on an upbeat in either 2/4 or 4/4, is prominently accented. The subsequent A-flat downbeat is contrastingly deemphasized, as the slur into this pitch occludes the looped "ha" pulse and also denies the sung downbeat a pronounced articulation. This is likely an example of what McClary refers to when she notes that the looped pulse changes only contextually, "when it is thrown temporarily out of kilter through phrasing."<sup>20</sup>

These metrically destabilizing motives are just one reason why it is uncannily difficult to entrain to a metric scheme in "O Superman" despite its rhythmic regularity. Another factor is the looped "ha," which does not provide any agogic accents that indicate meter. Additionally, the extended pauses between melodic phrases (as seen in Example 2) stifle their ability to project a meter, as it is easy to get lost in the metronomic repetition of a single syllable. This ambiguity is compounded by the fact that even when melodies are repeated—as the melody in Example 2 is directly following its exposition—the lengths of the pauses between phrases are not consistent. Extending the question of meter to "O Superman" as performed in *United States* (and recorded on *United States Live*) provides yet another complication. The piece directly before it, "Beginning French," ends with twenty seconds of only the looped beating of a gavel. Crucially, this pulse is the same tempo as the opening solo "ha" loop of "O Superman." As the latter loop is faded in, it is initially configured as a backbeat to the gavel's pulse. Gradually, though, as the two pulses trade dynamic levels and the gavel is faded out, the remaining pulse is eventually reinterpreted as primary. So, in live performance

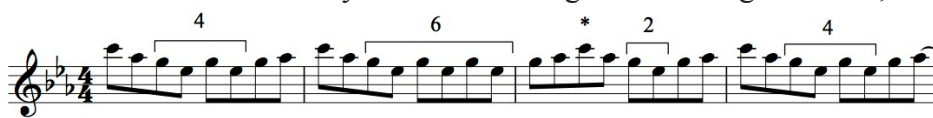
(and its recorded ghost), even the rhythmic beginnings of "O Superman" are in flux. With all these meter-indicating factors being obscured, the entrances, rhythmic

content, phrasing, and lengths of melodies and other sonic events become the main

avenues through which meter can become perceptible.

The always-emergent process of constructing meter in "O Superman" bears similarities to what Mark Butler describes in relation to rhythm and meter in electronic dance music (EDM). Butler argues that "an ongoing dialectic between fully formed 'meter' and pure, unadorned 'beats'" is characteristic of EDM.<sup>21</sup> Positing this feature as a reason why listeners find EDM interesting despite its repetitive structures and rhythms, Butler argues that in EDM, the "construction of meter is foregrounded as a *process*. Often just one or two layers are present, especially at the beginning of tracks."<sup>22</sup> When two rhythmic layers are present, they are typically "the first interpretive layer and the pulse layer."<sup>23</sup> This formulation can be neatly traced onto what occurs in "O Superman": the solo pulse layer initiates the song and is then joined by the melody in Example 2, the "first interpretive layer." Given these analytic parallels, it is plausible that in "O Superman," as well as in EDM, listener interest arises in part from an inclination towards metric entrainment. In other words, we get interested in the unfolding of underdetermined metric streams.<sup>24</sup> Future investigations might consider more fully extending Butler's discussion of EDM—which draws on Hasty's theory of projection—into the analysis of metric ambiguity, the potential of melodic and rhythmic phrases to project meter, and listeners' experiences of metric entrainment in Anderson's music.

As I have shown above, the diatonic and triadic pitch content of "O Superman" evokes functional tonality but categorically resists establishing a tonic, and the song's meter is emergent and underdetermined. While I have focused here on musical features in an effort to promote interest in and suggest approaches to the subject, I do not mean to advocate a conception of Anderson's music as an autonomous, hermetically sealed dimension of her cultural production. Rather, her music is always in dialogue with other features,



Example 3: Additive process in first ostinato (2:40-2:49)



## Anderson's "O Superman (for Massenet)" (cont.)

including Anderson's politicized lyrical language games; her (dis)embodied and technologized voice, which allows her to uncannily move between different personae and engage multiple discourses simultaneously; and the visualization of her performative gestures both live and on video, which could be integrated into discussions of rhythm in particular. Musical analyses should therefore not disregard these elements, but instead investigate how they establish connections with the musical dimension in constructing meaning. By following this line of inquiry, we may come to more fully understand the ways in which Anderson's music continues to negotiate the social and political terrains of contemporary American life.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 135.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Philip Auslander, "Going with the Flow: Performance Art and Mass Culture," *The Drama Review* 33:2 (Summer 1989): 119–136; Eu Jin Chua, "Laurie Anderson's Telepresence," *Postmodern Culture* 16:2 (January 2006); RoseLee Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000); Jon McKenzie, "Laurie Anderson for Dummies," *The Drama Review* 41:2 (Summer 1997): 30–50; Tony Mitchell, "Performance and the Postmodern in Pop Music," *Theatre Journal* 41:3 (October 1989): 273–293; and Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism Part 2," *October* 3 (Summer 1980): 58–80. Goldberg's book includes an in-depth discussion of Anderson's arsenal of electronic instruments but not the music made with them.

<sup>3</sup> McKenzie, "Laurie Anderson for Dummies," 31.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 30, 31.

<sup>5</sup> McKenzie defines selling out as "becoming a corporate puppet, a dummy of bureaucratic performance." *Ibid.*, 48, 47.

<sup>6</sup> Auslander, "Going with the Flow," 132.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>9</sup> Based on the description of the staged version in Mel Gordon, "Laurie Anderson's *United States Part II*," *The Drama Review* 24:4 (December 1980): 112–113.

<sup>10</sup> In the U.S., the track did not make the charts, but was more predictably aired on *RadioVisions*, a nationally broadcasted NPR program that aimed to introduce listeners to experimental new music. Louise Chernosky, "Voices of New Music on National Public Radio: *Radio Net*, *RadioVisions*, and *Maritime Rites*" (Unpublished dissertation, Columbia University, 2012), 116, <<http://academiccommons.columbia.edu/item/ac:147608>>.

<sup>11</sup> Goldberg, Laurie Anderson, 13.

<sup>12</sup> McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 137–138; Barbara Bradby, "Sampling Sexuality: Gender, Technology and the Body in Dance Music," *Popular Music* 12:2 (May 1993): 156–157.

<sup>13</sup> Or, as Theodore Gracyk has argued in the context of rock, which is "a system of music making and distribution that has been commercial since its inception, the line between authentic and unauthentic music is hardly useful." *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 179.

<sup>14</sup> Auslander, "Going with the Flow," 128.

<sup>15</sup> McClary, 143.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 142. Multiple factors support this conclusion: though the C minor chord is in root position and therefore more stable, the A-flat chord is heard first, and A-flat as a pitch class is highlighted through repetition, register, and placement in melodic phrasing. On the other hand, the looped pulsation on the syllable "ha" that continues throughout the entire song is on C.

<sup>17</sup> I have only indicated the fundamental vocal frequency, not the added harmonic layers provided by the vocoder. The key signature is used here only for convenience. My use of 4/4 is also not intended to be a definitive designation, but is used primarily to facilitate concise notation of the pulses that separate each melodic statement. I will discuss this further below. Transcriptions made from recording of "O Superman" on *Big Science*.

<sup>18</sup> For example, additive processes are fundamental to the music of Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* and Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians*.

<sup>19</sup> Philip Glass, *Music by Philip Glass*, ed. Robert T. Jones (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 58.

<sup>20</sup> McClary, 141.

<sup>21</sup> Mark J. Butler, *Unlocking the Groove: Rhythm, Meter, and Musical Design in Electronic Dance Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 115.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 111. Emphasis in original.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

# “I’ll Be With Him on the Midnight Train to Georgia”: The Traveling Woman in 1920s Blues and 1970s R&B

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Following Emancipation, African-American men found new freedom in travel. What had been largely fantasy during slavery was now reality, and for many, a necessity. Men migrated out of the South in droves in search of work, often leaving their female partners behind to care for children or run the household. Travel for African-American women in the first decades of the twentieth century was limited, often an “imagined reality” just out of reach.<sup>1</sup> Many women lived vicariously through the music of women blues singers who in their songs spun stories of female autonomy and freedom of movement. The singers themselves also presented an example of the traveling woman: “Being able to move both North and South, the women [*sic*] blues singer occupied a privileged space: she could speak the desires of rural women to migrate and voice the nostalgic desires of urban women for home, which was both a recognition and a warning that the city was not, in fact, the ‘promised land.’”<sup>2</sup>

Like women’s blues of the 1920s, female-centered African-American music of the 1970s, notably Gladys Knight and the Pips’ 1973 crossover hit “Midnight Train to Georgia,” thematically dealt with migration. While many women in the early decades of the century waited at home for their wandering men, women moved with their families to Northern cities in hopes of economic betterment during the Great Migration following World War I.<sup>3</sup> These decades of black migration reveal complex patterns of out-migration from the South, often in cyclical waves as portions of an extended family moved North or West and back again, though with an overall trend towards movement out of the South. It was not until the 1970s that the South experienced a net increase of African-Americans as migration patterns reversed. Black families began to move back to the South, typically joining extended family members still residing there. Many of those moving had not been born in the South but had had childhood experiences there, and as they were familiar with family stories, places, and friends, the South was the obvious choice for relocation.<sup>4</sup> Just as migration patterns reversed between the

1920s and the 1970s, gender identities and implications in “Midnight Train to Georgia” are opposite those in songs sung by blues women in the 1920s, though the traveling theme retains its metaphor of hope and transcendence.

Travel was a particularly strong theme in blues music of the 1920s: travel via train or one’s own two feet, travel to somewhere or away from somewhere. The theme of traveling connected simultaneously to past musical traditions popular during slavery and hope for a better future through the newfound freedom of movement after the Emancipation. During slavery, travel themes in spirituals linked the North with Heaven (as in “Follow the Drinking Gourd”), or for the majority of slaves who could not escape, pointed towards freedom in death (as in “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and “The Gospel Train”).<sup>5</sup>



Gladys Knight & the Pips  
Courtesy of Motown Records

The blues maintained the theme of travel, and for men this travel was firmly ingrained in reality. In the 1920s and 1930s, men often had to leave home and become itinerant in their search for work, while women were generally prevented from such travel through familial ties. Travel themes in women’s blues provided an escapist fantasy for female listeners while also altering societal

ideas about female independence, sexuality, and self-determination. In these songs, women’s freedom was not limited to movement; it also stood for sexual autonomy. And indeed, travel and sexual freedom were commonly paired in both women’s and men’s blues songs, wherein the singer boasts of having lovers in many different cities.<sup>6</sup> As Angela Davis argues, women’s blues in the 1920s generated ideological opposition in black consciousness to women’s place in society through these themes of agency and travel, thus destabilizing dominant gender politics.<sup>7</sup> In claiming autonomy of movement, blues singers and their female protagonists claimed sexual agency as well.

The impetus for travel tended to fall into two main camps: 1) leaving or searching for a man with whom the protagonist has had a sexual relationship, or 2)

## “Midnight Train to Georgia” (cont.)

returning home to the South after moving North with a man who has subsequently abandoned her. These reasons for travel in women’s blues, while they could signify dejection, rejection, or failure on the part of the woman, in reality served to bolster the protagonist’s confidence and project movement and agency, in turn “redefin[ing] black womanhood as active, assertive, independent, and sexual.”<sup>8</sup>

The desire to return to the South is a long-standing trope in not just blues music, but many genres throughout the mid-twentieth century, including Country-Western and R&B. This theme of returning inevitably indicates other regions that one must leave, positioning the South in relation to the non-South, somewhat at odds with the rest of the country. Tara McPherson discusses this relationality in *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*: “if one is to understand the many versions of the South that circulate throughout U.S. history and culture, one has always to see them as fundamentally connected to, and defined in relation to, the non-South.”<sup>9</sup> The South and its histories (both the idealized, mythological one and the more realistic one) are inextricably intertwined with the histories of the rest of the country. In other words, the South takes its identity from its relations with the North, the West, or simply the non-South.

Many 1970s songwriters used this historical-geographical opposition as a point of departure for songs about traveling, home, and the tensions between city and rural life. Songs in this genre often depict Southern protagonists, black and white alike, who either specify the city or region they would like to leave or communicate a desire to leave a generic hyper-urban context, juxtaposing tough urban streets with the gentle rural mythology of Southern life.<sup>10</sup> “Everybody’s Talkin’ at Me,” the theme from the hugely influential film *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), is a case in point. The protagonist desperately wants to leave the horrors of New York City, “backing off of the Northeast wind” to return to the South, where life is better even during times of strife, where the “sun keeps shining/through the pouring rain.”

A major factor in the success of such music is its grounding in Southern nostalgia, a notion mired in social myth, historical stereotyping, and cultural amnesia. Music that embraces this theme of sociocultural nostalgia for the South takes its place in a long line of similar literary tropes, the most prominent being Margaret Mitchell’s Pulitzer prize-winning epic *Gone with*

*the Wind*. These tropes further cement the notion of an idealized, largely fictional Southern culture. McPherson describes what she calls our “cultural schizophrenia about the South”<sup>11</sup>: on the one hand, the region remains ensconced in marketed images of the Southern Belle and plantation life, full of lazy summer afternoons and mint juleps, compassionate Mammy figures and fried chicken, while on the other hand it is the site of the horrors and violence of slavery and Jim Crow.<sup>12</sup> The South, well aware of its traumatic history, remains “the mythic location of a vast nostalgia industry”<sup>13</sup> aimed at capitalizing on America’s endless fascination with the “old South.” Here McPherson assumes a largely white perspective of Southern nostalgia; Southern nostalgia among African-American musics seems to stem primarily from cultural and familial ties.

In women’s traveling blues, the South often represents a place of promise and hope, a place replete with familial bonds that signifies “home.” In “South Bound Blues,” the protagonist follows her man to the North, is abandoned, and then takes the train home to Georgia with a definite sense of relief (“goin’ back to Georgia folks, I sure ain’t comin’ back”). As Davis says, “The actual return by train to Georgia described in ‘South Bound Blues’ can be read as a spiritual identification with the black ethos of the South and the cumulative struggles black people have collectively waged over the centuries.”<sup>14</sup> The North here represents an alien, hostile, hyper-urban locale, a place of poverty and isolation, while the South is the site of a communal cultural history bolstered by family ties and familiar places.

The return migration to the South that began in the 1970s included many African Americans “returning” to the South despite not having lived there previously. For them, the South represented a “homeplace” and the center of family history.<sup>15</sup> Many moved to join pre-existing households within their families, households that likely already felt like a second home. The ease of moving “back” to their homeplace was made possible through strong connections with those still living there, friends and extended family whose generosity supported new transplants economically, emotionally, and logistically.<sup>16</sup> The Southern homeplace thus represented a safe haven, a destination for a bright new future built on one’s own (nostalgic) ancestral past.



## “Midnight Train to Georgia” (cont.)

Amid the reverse migration of the early 1970s, Gladys Knight and the Pips recorded “Midnight Train to Georgia,” which quickly rose to the top of the charts to become a crossover success still beloved today. The history of “Midnight Train” is unusual: originally conceived as a Country-Western song, it was recorded first on acoustic guitar with white male vocals, then by Cissy Houston as an R&B song with strong Country-Western elements (such as a harmonica playing “Tara’s Theme” from *Gone With the Wind*), and then recorded again by Gladys Knight in an entirely R&B version.

Written in 1972 by Jim Weatherly, a singer-songwriter from Mississippi, “Midnight Train to Georgia” was originally titled “Midnight Plane to Houston.” Weatherly was inspired by a trip Farrah Fawcett, his friend Lee Majors’s girlfriend at the time, took to visit her family in Texas. Thus, Fawcett and Majors were the protagonists in Weatherly’s mind as he conceptualized the song.<sup>17</sup>

After recording the song on his eponymous first album *Weatherly* (1972), Weatherly sent it to Gladys Knight to record; clearly he saw potential in using a different soundscape for it, and R&B might have been an obvious choice for him considering the success of his song “Neither One of Us,” recorded by Knight the same year.<sup>18</sup> Initially, the idea of recording his Country-Western pieces in the R&B genre had been surprising to Weatherly: “I never really imagined writing R&B songs. I really thought I was writing country songs. But they heard something in my songs—looking back it was probably the way they had a lot of space between lyrics. I didn’t try to fill up everything with words or move everything close together. The songs would breathe, so you were almost waiting for what the next line was, as opposed to the line hitting before you were ready to hear it.”<sup>19</sup> According to one interview with Weatherly, before Knight had a chance to cover the piece, producer Sonny Limbo called Weatherly and asked to cut the track with Cissy Houston singing.<sup>20</sup> In a bid to appeal to black audiences (and to radio stations catering to black audiences), Limbo and Weatherly decided to change the title to “Midnight Train to Georgia.”<sup>21</sup> Commercially, this was probably an excellent move, considering Georgia’s central position in the Southern nostalgia industry. Houston’s version came out in 1972, and Knight recorded her version in 1973.<sup>22</sup>

The main characters of “Midnight Plane to Houston” are white, and initially, their genders are switched: the woman leaves LA for home, for “a simpler place and time.” The final line of the chorus was “I’d rather live in her world than live without her in mine,” rather than the other way around (“I’d rather live in *his* world than live without *him* in mine”). It is the female character who cannot make it in LA, and it is her male companion who follows her. In this version the female character succumbs to “traditional” gender stereotypes in line with mid-century suburban American ideals, as opposed to those depicted in the re-titled version that eventually rose to the top of the charts. In the culture of these “traditional” ideals, it is not surprising that the woman cannot support herself in the “real world” of LA; her failure only confirms preset gender stereotypes about women who stray from the role of homemaker. When Houston recorded the song, producers wanted to create a “genuine”-sounding performance; therefore, all the pronouns had to be reversed to keep things “honest,” a quality Weatherly desired.<sup>23</sup>

The resulting song repositions the man as a failure and effectively emasculates him while granting the woman agency of movement. The weakening of the male character through return travel to the South stands in direct contrast to women’s blues repertory, where for women, “movement backward into the African-American historical past [became] movement forward, progressive exploration,” and those who made that journey projected courage and independence.<sup>24</sup> In “Midnight Train to Georgia,” the man does not seem to be so redeemed. LA is “too much” for him; he needs a “simpler place and time” because he “couldn’t make it” in the big city, and he slinks away in the dead of night. The mention of a one-way ticket home in particular signals utter defeat because he gives up independence of movement by selling his car to pay for the fare.

What little agency the man wields in his return home is overshadowed by his economic situation, while the woman is under no such duress. She elects to follow her love across the country to “his world” of rural Georgia and away from her own.<sup>25</sup> Refusal to stay home and pine away for a man gone traveling is characteristic of songs by blues women such as “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith, where instead, the protagonist often sets out to find her lover. “Midnight Train” takes this idea one step further—the woman goes with her man

## “Midnight Train to Georgia” (cont.)

from the beginning—though in this case, the man is returning home and the woman is venturing into new worlds.

In traveling between the urban and the rural, the song’s main characters straddle not only geography, but culture, emotion, and time. The man, moving both forward in his lived time and back towards his Southern past, is thus linked to a “simpler place and time”: the “backwards” rural South, which according to McPherson is seemingly suspended in time. The woman experiences a movement backwards in time in another, more general, way: from an over-developed, technologically dense, hyper-urbanity to the slower-paced, almost innocent life of the rural South, which to her may feel alien. Two kinds of nostalgia are in play here: the man’s experience, in which he returns to the world of his childhood and the safety of family and friends; and the woman’s, whose conceptions of the South are necessarily based on cultural stereotypes and popular ideas of Southern nostalgia.<sup>26</sup>

The mythology of travel virtually requires an internal transformation as the outcome, as any good travel story can attest.<sup>27</sup> Stories of travel in blues literature reveal the protagonist’s personal growth and transcendence, while for women blues singers themselves the act of touring around the country fundamentally altered their lives, “challeng[ing] the normal social expectations surrounding female experience.”<sup>28</sup> Rainey’s “Lost Wandering Blues,” for example, describes an emotional and spiritual journey comingled with a physical one, offering myriad possibilities for the outcome.<sup>29</sup> In “Midnight Train to Georgia” as well, the protagonist’s travels function as a catalyst for internal transformation. Unlike in the blues, the transformation in “Midnight Train” is not text-based, but rooted in the harmonies: the gospel chord progression grafted onto the descending tetrachordal bass line.

The steady, stepwise descent of the bass correlates with the rhythm of travel, be it the swing of walking, tires rolling over the seams on a concrete highway, or the constant clickety-clack of a train. The cyclic bass line of “Midnight Train” repeats over and over again, moving in stately stepwise fashion down to the fifth degree, which, when harmonized, points the chord progression back to the tonic. Periodically, however, this bass line interrupts its cycle with a decidedly gospel element: during the verses, every third cycle of the pat-

tern includes a V/V harmony, a gospel “rise” inserted in an otherwise straightforward descending tetrachord.

The “rise” is a semiotic tradition in gospel music that positions the V/V chord as a kind of out of body experience; it is traditionally used to demonstrate how the body might rise up to heaven. The otherworldly destination mimics the rapture and illustrates the travel of the soul from this world to the next. Other gospel influences in Knight’s recording, such as the continual call and response and the final improvisatory section, strengthen the V/V’s gospel connotations. The presence of such a chord in this song suggests Georgia as a kind of heaven on Earth, adding to the idyllic yet bittersweet mythical quality of the Southern nostalgia that fills Georgia’s coffers of cultural history. Its presence also reinforces the theme of train travel, calling to mind the story of the gospel train that carries the soul up to heaven.

Knight’s protagonist is an active participant in her own transcendence, engaging in call and response with the Pips and singing improvisatory vocalizations with strength and confidence. During the song’s coda, the V/V slips out of the picture completely as Knight improvises over the descending tetrachord with “for love, (I’m) gonna board the midnight train to Georgia” and “I’ve got to go, I’ve got to go.” In this final section, Knight and the Pips play off of each other as they have done for the entire song, though with Knight’s heightened improvisatory style the coda works itself into a celebratory frenzy as the music fades out. Interestingly, the removal of one gospel element (the V/V chord), allows for the insertion of another: vocal improvisations that move towards a general emotional release, a technique that performs ecstasy and rapture.

In the fifty years between the height of women’s classic blues and the release of Knight’s “Midnight Train to Georgia,” African-American migration patterns and gender expectations with respect to travel and movement shifted. Looking at this shift through the lens of African-American female-centered music reveals changes that took place with respect to women’s independence, freedom of movement, and self-determination. The traveling woman in the 1920s was a rarity and a fantasy; by the 1970s, a traveling woman was strong and independent. “Midnight Train” not only lends the figure of the traveling woman greater agency and a newfound sense of adventure, it provides a concrete example of a powerful, successful, independent female voice through Knight’s performance. Yet the song

## “Midnight Train to Georgia” (cont.)

also maintains its ties to previous iterations of the same theme: freedom of movement and of sexuality, women’s autonomy, and, ultimately, transcendence.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 66.

<sup>2</sup> Hazel V. Carby, “‘It Jus’ Be’s Dat Way Sometime’: The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues,” *Radical Amerika* 20:4 (1986):16.

<sup>3</sup> John Cromartie and Carol B. Stack, “Reinterpretation of Black Return and Nonreturn Migration to the South 1975-1980,” *Geographical Review* 79:3 (July, 1989): 299-301.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>5</sup> Multiple sources examine this trend. See Carby’s article in *Radical Amerika* and Davis’s chapter “Here Come My Train: Traveling Themes and Women’s Blues” in particular.

<sup>6</sup> In Bessie Smith’s “Mama’s Got the Blues,” the protagonist, newly abandoned by her husband, boasts of having nineteen lovers in four other states. For further discussion, see Davis, 75.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 75

<sup>9</sup> Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>10</sup> I use the term ‘hyper-urban’ here to denote those “big, bad” (non-Southern) cities like New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, etc...as opposed to the ‘softer,’ mythically less threatening urban areas of the South. Much of this idea of Southern cities being laid back, safe, and non-threatening comes from a specifically white consciousness, one that has been picked up by marketing companies, especially those working in the tourism industry.

<sup>11</sup> McPherson, 3. McPherson defines the South in the traditional way: south of the Mason-Dixon line. I would like to add my own parameters as well. For my purposes, the South continues along the southern bank of the Ohio River and extends as far west as eastern Texas.

<sup>12</sup> I place the fictional mammy figure somewhat anachronistically next to Jim Crow to demonstrate how she is used as a symbol for black happiness and contentment that is often superimposed on the political and social denigration of black Southerners.

<sup>13</sup> McPherson, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Davis, 81.

<sup>15</sup> Cromartie and Stack, 301. The authors term this type of “return” the “homeplace migration movement,” 306.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 306.

<sup>17</sup> Historical and background information taken from a 2008 interview with Jim Weatherly entitled “Ten Questions with Jim Weatherly,” published by the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame. The interview can be found at <http://www.nashvillesongwritersfoundation.com/200805/jim-weatherly.aspx>.

<sup>18</sup> Weatherly and Knight already had a good working relationship by the time he sent her “Midnight Plane to Houston.” “Neither One of Us,” the first recording on which they combined their talents, rose to number one on the charts in 1973. “Midnight Train” followed later that year, and in 1974 Knight recorded her third Weatherly composition, “Best Thing That Ever Happened To Me.” See the Nashville Songwriters interview.

<sup>19</sup> Nashville Songwriters interview.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. In this interview, Limbo is erroneously called “Sunny Limbs.”

<sup>21</sup> Gary James’ Interview with Jim Weatherly, undated, found at <http://www.classicbands.com/JimWeatherlyInterview.html>. The details are slightly different and a bit more vague in James’ interview. Also, the idea of a singer named Houston singing “Midnight Plane to Houston” is rather comical in its own right.

<sup>22</sup> Nashville Songwriters interview. Knight was much more enthusiastic about the song after the name change. Weatherly mentions that since the Pips were from Georgia, it was “a natural” for them, and that Knight also “felt more at home with it.”

<sup>23</sup> Weatherly uses the word “honest” four times to describe this song and his music in general in the interview by Gary James.

<sup>24</sup> Davis, 81.

<sup>25</sup> We assume the man is from rural Georgia, though in this case even Atlanta might be considered ‘quaint’ when placed alongside Los Angeles.

<sup>26</sup> Biographically, a third kind of nostalgia exists with respect to the Pips, who perform a yearning for Georgia-as-home while remembering the Georgia of their own childhoods.

<sup>27</sup> All meaningful travel narratives are about self-transformation or transcendence on some level, and even ancient travel stories such as *The Odyssey* still hold enormous cultural influence. A particularly apt example for the place and time under discussion, though largely dealing with white characters, is the retelling of Homer’s story in the Coen brothers’ 2000 film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

<sup>28</sup> Davis, 72.

<sup>29</sup> For a nuanced discussion of this song, see Davis, 76-79.



## DJ Kuttin Kandi: Performing Feminism

Ellie M. Hisama, Columbia University

As a turntablist, Pinay, poet, feminist, and activist, DJ Kuttin Kandi challenges the sexism manifested in hip hop and popular music by collaborating with other women in her performances, publishing open letters about male-dominated lineups, and speaking critically about controversies such as Day Above Ground's 2013 song and video "Asian Girlz."<sup>1</sup> In his recent book *Filipinos Represent*, Anthonio Tiongson Jr. suggests that hip hop DJing provides a site for Filipina DJs to negotiate gender conventions, sexual norms, and familial expectations.<sup>2</sup> Kuttin Kandi's performances are a form of critical authorship that actively engages a politics of the feminist body and are grounded in feminist collaboration.



DJ Kuttin Kandi making music  
Courtesy of Kuttin Kandi

A long-time member of the New York-based DJ crew 5th Platoon, Kandi was the first woman to place in the US finals of the prestigious DMC USA competition in 1998.<sup>3</sup> She has toured throughout the US and internationally, performing with distinguished musicians including Afrika Bambaataa, Kool Herc, Black Eyed Peas, MC Lyte, the Roots, dead prez, Immortal Technique, and Le Tigre. Kandi has been deeply involved in cultural advocacy and grassroots political organizations, having worked with Filipino American Human Services and Gabriela Network to fight the sexual exploitation of Filipinas, police brutality, and sweatshop labor. While living in New York, she taught the art of turntabling and DJing at the Scratch DJ Academy, and taught spoken word and poetry to high school students at El Puente Leadership Center in Brooklyn.

After moving to southern California in 2006, Kuttin Kandi started working at the Women's Center at the University of California, San Diego. Although she began a sabbatical in 2012 after having heart surgery, she recently participated in organizations including the All Peoples Revolutionary Front, which "engages critical knowledge to inform political struggle," and the Peoples Power Assembly in San Diego, which aims to "raise awareness around the issues ... rooted in racial hate, social inequality, and civil injustices" that have resulted in tragedies such as the killing of Trayvon Martin.<sup>4</sup> This year she organized several fundraising events in New York and San Diego for those affected by Typhoon Haiyan in Southeast Asia in November 2013; the survivors include women and children exploited by a sex trafficking industry that preys upon those made more vulnerable by catastrophic disasters.<sup>5</sup>

Kuttin Kandi's working-class upbringing undercuts the sweeping presumption of an Anglo-Asian overclass referenced by Frank Wu, one that is predicated on the belief that Asians in the US comprise a so-called model minority in contrast to a presumed African American-Hispanic underclass.<sup>6</sup> Her father immigrated from the Philippines in the late 1960s and her mother in the early 1970s, and she was born Candice Custodio in Elmhurst, Queens in 1975. Her grandmother, cousins, and other relatives joined the Custodio family in the US, and she grew up with fifteen people living in a small house, sharing a bedroom with her sister and three cousins.

In Jersey City, her parents owned a Filipino/a store, where they sold food in a *turo-turo* ("point-point" in Tagalog), an informal eatery in which diners choose dishes of prepared food, and they were among the first Filipino street vendors in New York, selling traditional Filipino foods at street fairs including a vegetarian, bean sprout-based version of *ukoy*, a Filipino shrimp fritter. When she was nineteen, her father died of cancer. The medical bills from his care resulted in the family's amassing of a mound of debt at the same time that her mother's employer filed for bankruptcy. Unable to pay their bills, collection agencies came calling, and the Custodio family had their electricity shut off and faced foreclosure on their home. If they had not managed to sell their house in a three-day window, they would have been homeless.<sup>7</sup>

## Performing Feminism (cont.)

As a Pinay, Candice did not fit in either at home or at school. She grew up in the predominantly white neighborhood of Fresh Meadows, Queens, where she knew only two other Asian families; when she and her grandmother walked to school, white boys frequently made racist comments to them. As a fourth-grader attending a public school near the projects in Po-monock, Queens, Candice was one of only four Asian students; most of her classmates were Black and Puerto Rican. She recalls “denying [as a child that] I was a brown-shaded Pinay, so ashamed I was not the same as those around me.”<sup>8</sup> Her feelings of “not fitting in” and her experiences of racism result from what cultural theorist Lisa Lowe identifies as “the project of imagining the nation as homogeneous [which] requires the orientalist construction of cultures and geographies from which Asian immigrants come, as fundamentally foreign origins.”<sup>9</sup>

A turning point for Candice occurred when she was nine and attended the annual school talent show. In her words:

“Fresh” by Kool & the Gang came bursting from the speakers. ... [T]wo Pilipina American girls dressed in red hooded sweatshirts and swishy pants came from behind the curtains and started poppin’ to the beat of the song. They moonwalked across the stage, busted waves, and locked on rhythm. ... The girls simultaneously flipped onto the floor and spun on their backs continuously. ... It was on that night that I sat ... wishing I had the same confidence that [Johanna and Jeanette] had on stage, as they made me proud to be Pilipina and gave birth to my first Hip Hop experience.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than encountering hip hop through the sexist lyrics and posturings of male rappers or DJs or through the diva image for women cultivated by the industry, Kandi was inspired to become a part of hip-hop culture by two Pinay b-girls who, through a performance both athletic and joyous, unwittingly helped her to embrace rather than reject her ethnic background. Kandi told me that seeing Pinay turntablist Symphony perform inspired her to become a turntablist herself.<sup>11</sup> Kandi has, in turn, inspired other female DJs including Killa-Jewel from Montreal and Pinay DJ One Tyme.<sup>12</sup>

Like other Filipinas who immigrate to the US, Kandi was drawn to the profession of nursing, and she entered a nursing program at Queensborough Community College. After her father’s death, she suffered from intense depression and continued to struggle with an eating disorder she has had since the age of seven. In her poem “Blue and Red” she writes:

always depressed  
wore the pants baggy  
cause I wanted to hide my body  
ashamed to be the real me  
even to my own family<sup>13</sup>

Her physical appearance challenges the ways in which female Asian bodies have been culturally constructed. She is not a stereotypically petite Asian woman. As historian Gary Okihiro observes:

Asians embody the geographies of the East and nonwhiteness, and the gendering that delineates “woman.” The Asian body ... reveals that there are within the American imaginary masculine races and feminized races, and normative genders and deviant genders. White manliness in late-nineteenth-century America was made, in part, in the nation’s imperial project in Asia and the Pacific and in the conquest by remasculinized white American men of feminine Asian and Pacific peoples...<sup>14</sup>

Kandi disdainfully notes that female DJs are expected to wear revealing clothing, offering “a certain look” with palatable music.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately a number of female DJs are willing to supply this element to appease a sexist, male-dominated industry and perpetuate the stereotype of women willing to perform in skimpy clothing while haplessly trainwrecking records.

The club DJ and the turntablist inhabit differently gendered worlds. Mark Katz argues that “girls and women are not actively discouraged from battling, and are warmly received when they do participate”<sup>16</sup> and he notes that when DJ Qbert was asked about his hopes for what the future of turntablism would bring, his reply was “More girl DJs.”<sup>17</sup> Thus while the female party DJ may reap more gigs if she dons a halter top, turntabling and DJ battles require skills of people of all genders.

## Performing Feminism (cont.)

Kandi emphasizes that performance provides her a “way of her own survival.”<sup>18</sup> Since her hospitalization in 2012, she has written a series of Facebook posts titled *Notes of a Revolutionary Patient*. She has mentioned struggles with depression and past sexual abuse, thoughts of suicide, and having to deal with negative judgments about her body. For her, performing was both healing and therapeutic.<sup>19</sup>

Kandi was first exposed to the world of DJing by her father, who was a DJ who spun at parties and who introduced her to the music of Carole King, Michael Jackson, Aretha Franklin, and Sly and the Family Stone. At age sixteen, she started to practice turntabling at a friend’s house. Not wanting to contribute to negative stereotypes about women’s inability to scratch while she developed her skills, she practiced in secret as a kind of modern-day belle of Fresh Meadows. She learned from watching her then-boyfriend Roli Rho. “Seeing him spin at parties with his mobile crew, ... being able to rock the crowd, inspired me to want to do the same. It’s amazing to see people dance to music that a DJ plays, and how the DJ has the power to control them. When I saw Roli doing all of that, I wanted to be a part, too.” Kandi’s desire not to sit on the sidelines but to take charge of a room transformed her from a “bedroom DJ” who never displays turntabling skills in public, to a battle DJ, and she started competing herself, even eventually beating Roli Rho himself in a competition sponsored by the hip hop magazine *The Source* in 1998.<sup>20</sup>

After observing hip hop’s sexism first-hand, in 1995 Kuttin Kandi and a woman named Helixx C Armageddon formed a twenty-member multi-racial all-female crew called the Anomalies. Kandi recalls the Anomalies’ origins:

We wanted to form a crew that brought women together who shared the common love for Hip-Hop music. We wanted to start a bond with other women who are looking for that same under-

standing and support that we were searching for. Although many of us work with men, we still find it hard to be able to cope with certain issues that some men can’t deal with or understand.... We wanted to show that there are women out there with skills... who [aren’t] all about sex, greed, and violence.<sup>21</sup>

As well as meaning “departure from the common order,” their name the Anomalies, contains the words “No Mo Lies.” Kandi notes that while the Anomalies are still redefining themselves nineteen years after their founding, she loosely defines them as “open to wom-\*n-identified, trans\* and gender non-conforming.”<sup>22</sup>

She first adopted the alias “DJ Candice” which evolved into Cotton Candy, and eventually into Kuttin Kandi; “Kuttin” refers to the DJ’s art of cutting and splicing from one record to another without losing the beat. The term “turntablist” was invented by DJ Babu to mean a person who “uses the turntable in the spirit of a musical instrument; one who has the ability to improvise on a phonograph turntable.”<sup>23</sup> DJ Rob Swift of the X-Ecutioners argues that “the turntable is a musical instrument as long as you [can] see it being a musical instrument. You’re dealing with notes, you’re dealing with measures, you’re dealing with timing,

you’re dealing with rhythm. It’s just ... different tools, but the outcome is the same: music.”<sup>24</sup> Kandi defines turntabling as “manipulating vinyl through scratching and spinning as an instrument of expression.”<sup>25</sup>

Scratching refers to the pushing and pulling of records on the turntable to

create loops, repeated sections, sound effects, and musical bursts. David Toop defines turntable scratching as “a means of gouging quick, semi-identifiable traces of music from the grooves of a record and transmuting these electronically transmitted traces into furred and splintered drum noise. ... Each individual scratch has the quality of tropical birdsong, a richness of tone spiked with percussive impact.”<sup>26</sup>



*a-n-o-m-o-l-i-e-s*  
Courtesy of Kuttin Kandi



## Performing Feminism (cont.)

Types of scratching include the baby scratch; the crab scratch, a complex move that requires four fingers on the fader; and a host of other techniques that result in a palette of sounds including burps, chirps, and rubs. Scratching requires a strong arm, quick wrist, an ability to coordinate and juggle multiple tasks at once, an encyclopedic knowledge of a range of musics, and a compositional sense of how to mix and extract musical ideas and to manipulate tempo and pitch, attacks and decays.

Kuttin Kandi can be heard in a section of Fifth Platoon's "Fifth Platoon Game" scratching over Wreckx-N-Effect's "Rump Shaker," a tune that, as suggested by the title, has overt sexualized content and over-the-top misogyny in its reduction of women to quivering posteriors whose "award is a long sharp sword."<sup>27</sup> Kandi's treatment of "Rump Shaker" is a feminist intervention through turntablism in a tradition of sexist music-making.<sup>28</sup>

Kuttin Kandi's mixtapes *Never Underestimate the Power of a Woman* (1995) and *A Bgirl Stance in a Bboy's World* (1997) contain examples of her feminist tracks that employ samples of songs by women including Queen Latifah's "Ladies First" and Lauryn Hill's "Lost Ones."<sup>29</sup> Her mix CD *Scratchalicious* displays her extraordinary scratching skills.<sup>30</sup> On the track "4DXO Break Skratch Session," Kandi takes Lil Mo's song "Superwoman, Part II" from her 2001 CD *Based on a True Story* and extracts a three-second sample of the line "They don't make any girls like me." She weaves the phrase into an urban tapestry of female and male voices, evoking a walk down a street in midtown Manhattan or perhaps a self-assured woman's internalized voices.

In a performance recorded at Tableturns, an open turntable event held at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in New York, Kandi recomposes Silver Convention's 1975 tune "Get Up and Boogie" by extending the solo instrumental section, and slicing apart both the two-word shouted male exclamation ("That's right!") and the four-word female admonition ("Get up and boogie").<sup>31</sup> She splices together the male and female voices to create a choppy, stuttering effect, which results in the tune's de-dancification—it becomes merely noddable—brilliantly undercutting the song's original premise.

Rather than serving the misogynist goals of a male-dominated industry that reaps financial, social, and political profits from female labor, Kandi believes that

Hip hop can be a positive tool. Hip hop is a culture, but it's also a tool to reach out to people, a tool to express yourself. All music, not just hip hop, is a way to express your inner being, to let people know who you are inside. It makes people understand in ways they can't understand through words. ... [Being a DJ gives you] a way to express yourself and find freedom. Freedom from oppression, freedom from self; that's what hip hop is.<sup>32</sup>

With her multi-pronged challenges to sexism in hip hop, Kuttin Kandi shows that feminist DJ authorship can be both critical and collaborative, and expands our notions of what hip hop can be.

## Notes

This article is drawn from a paper delivered at "Sexing Sound: A Symposium on Music Cultures, Audio Practices, and Contemporary Art," The Center for Humanities and Ph.D. Program in Art History, CUNY Graduate Center, 21 February 2014.

<sup>1</sup> "Pinay" is a "woman of Filipino descent, a Filipina in America and/or a Filipina American." See Allyson Goce Tintiangco-Cubales, "Pinayism," in *Pinay Power: Peminist Critical Theory: Theorizing the Filipina/American Experience*, ed. Melinda L. de Jesús (New York: Routledge, 2005), 140; DJ Kuttin Kandi, "An Open Letter, A Call to Action to Our Hip-Hop Community: Put us Women on that Line-Up & Stop the Disrespect!" 28 June 2010, <http://hiphopandpolitics.com/2010/06/28/an-open-letter-a-call-to-action-to-our-hip-hop-community-put-us-women-on-that-line-up-stop-the-disrespect/>. For information about the controversy about "Asian Girlz," see Derrick Clifton, "Q&A: 'Asian Girlz' Singer Joe Anselm of Day Above Ground," *Huffington Post*, 5 August 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/derrick-clifton/asian-girlz-day-above-ground\\_b\\_3705655.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/derrick-clifton/asian-girlz-day-above-ground_b_3705655.html); DJ Kuttin Kandi, "A Rant to Day Above Ground: I am not your Asian Fetish," <https://www.facebook.com/notes/kuttin-kandi/a-rant-to-day-above-ground-i-am-not-your-asian-fetish/10151746982633374>; and Angry Asian Man blog posting, 30 July 2013, <http://blog.angryasianman.com/2013/07/okay-so-this-is-pretty-much-worst-thing.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Antonio T. Tiongson Jr., *Filipinos Represent: DJs, Racial Authenticity, and the Hip-hop Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 80-81.

## Performing Feminism (cont.)

<sup>3</sup> Unless specified otherwise, biographical material on DJ Kuttin Kandi is drawn from interviews with the author, New York, NY, 14 July 2003 and San Diego, CA, 17-18 August 2013. DJ Kuttin Kandi's performance at the 1998 DMC USA composition can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-1oybbMzyl>.

<sup>4</sup> DJ Kuttin Kandi, "Performing to Survive: Accepting Truths and Finding Purpose," in *Empire of Funk: Hip Hop and Representation in Filipina/o America*, ed. Mark R. Villegas, Kuttin Kandi, and Roderick N. Labrador (San Diego: Cognella, 2014), 275; All Peoples Revolutionary Front, About APRFront, <http://aprfsandiego.wordpress.com/about/>; Meeting of the Peoples Power Assembly, San Diego, Malcolm X Library and Performing Arts Center, Valencia Park Branch, San Diego, CA, 18 August 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Nekoro Gomes, "Excellent Bushwick Hip-Hop Concert Helps Philippines Recovery Effort," *Bushwick Daily*, 13 January 2014, <http://bushwickdaily.com/2014/01/excellent-bushwick-hip-hop-concert-helps-philippines-recovery-effort/>; Dita Quiñones, "MCs Unite for Typhoon Benefit," 7 February 2014, <http://www.nbcsandiego.com/blogs/sounddiego/Immortal-Technique-Unites-Emcees-for-Typhoon-Yolanda-Fundraiser-243642601.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Frank H. Wu, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 19.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with the author, New York, NY, 14 July 2003.

<sup>8</sup> DJ Kuttin Kandi, "Introduction: A Hip Hop Story to Tell: It's Just Begun," in *Empire of Funk*, xvi.

<sup>9</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>10</sup> DJ Kuttin Kandi, "Introduction," xvi.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with the author, New York, NY, 14 July 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Katz, *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 242; Tiongson, *Filipinos Represent*, 75.

<sup>13</sup> DJ Kuttin Kandi, "Performing to Survive: Accepting Truths and Finding Purpose," in *Empire of Funk*, 271.

<sup>14</sup> Gary Y. Okihiro, *Common Ground: Reimagining American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), xiii.

<sup>15</sup> Eunice Park, "Kuttin' [sic] Kandi," *AsianWeek: The Voice of Asian America*, 1 August 2001, 24.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 134.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with the author, San Diego, CA, 18 August 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. She elaborates on the relationship between performing and survival in DJ Kuttin Kandi, "Performing to Survive," 271-276.

<sup>20</sup> Mark Katz discusses gender in relation to DJ battles in "Men, Women, and Turntables: Gender and the DJ Battle," *The Musical Quarterly* 89/4 (2006): 580-99.

<sup>21</sup> MarWax, "The ladies, the ladies...: Interview with Kuttin Kandi [sic] (Fifth Platoon)," 30 January 2000, <http://www.5thplatoon.com/articles/kuttinkandiinterview.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> DJ Kuttin Kandi, e-mail to the author, 27 June 2014. As Hugh Ryan notes, the asterisk in trans\* is used to "capture all the identities—from drag queen to genderqueer—that fall outside traditional gender norms." See Ryan, "What does trans\* mean, and where did it come from?" *Slate*, 10 January 2014, [http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2014/01/10/trans\\_what\\_does\\_it\\_mean\\_and\\_where\\_did\\_it\\_come\\_from.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2014/01/10/trans_what_does_it_mean_and_where_did_it_come_from.html).

<sup>23</sup> *Scratch*, dir. Doug Pray (Palm Pictures, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Park, "Kuttin' Kandi," 24.

<sup>26</sup> David Toop, "Hip Hop: Iron Needles of Death And A Piece of Wax," in *Modulations: A History of Electronic Music Throbbing Words on Sound*, ed. Peter Shapiro (New York: Caipirinha Productions, 2000), 92.

<sup>27</sup> 5th Platoon, "5th Platoon Game," CD *Plugged in 3* (Community Connect, Inc., 2001).

<sup>28</sup> Thanks to Loren Kajikawa for sharing his thoughts about this track.

<sup>29</sup> Kuttin Kandi's scratching of Queen Latifah's "Ladies First" is posted at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75cO-6Mx5HU>.

<sup>30</sup> DJ Kuttin Kandi, *Scratchalicious*, The Combo Platter, vol. 2 (Room Service, 2002).

<sup>31</sup> *Tableturns 2nd Anniversary*, dir. John Carluccio (VHS, 1999). Kandi performs a shorter version of "Get Up and Boogie" at the 1998 DMC USA competition.

<sup>32</sup> Michelle Caswell, "Life as a Female Filipino DJ," [asiasociety.org](http://asiasociety.org), <http://asiasociety.org/arts/performing-arts/music/life-female-filipino-dj>.

# The H. Wiley Hitchcock Institute for Studies in American Music

and The Ethyle R. Wolfe Institute for the Humanities at Brooklyn College  
In collaboration with the Conservatory of Music, the Department of Africana Studies,  
and the American Studies Program at Brooklyn College present:

## Music in Polycultural America

### Speaker Series—Spring 2014

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#### **Hair and the Gender Politics of Late-1960s Youth Culture** **Elizabeth Wollman**

**Elizabeth L. Wollman** is an Assistant Professor of Music at Baruch College. Her research and teaching interests include American popular and vernacular musics, the mass media, the musical theater, gender studies, aesthetics, and the postwar cultural history of New York City. She is author of *The Theater Will Rock: A History of the Rock Musical, From Hair to Hedwig* (University of Michigan Press, 2006), and most recently *Hard Times: The Adult Musical in 1970s New York City* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

**Wednesday, February 26<sup>th</sup> at 11:00 a.m.**

**State Lounge: 5th floor, SUBO Brooklyn College**

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#### **Singing the Gods: Songs of Devotion, Praise, and Invocation in Brooklyn**

Singing associated with religious practice is one of the ways to achieve relationship with the divine. This special program of lecture/demonstration performances teaches how music shapes religious devotion in diverse Brooklyn communities. Performers include **Rita Silva** (Bahia, Brazil candomblé sung invocations); **Said Damir** with **Aminou Belyamani** (Moroccan gnawaa) presented by **Hafida Torres**; **Shobana (Raj) Raghavan** with her student **Amrita Vijay** (Hindu Carnatic); and **Winston “Jeggae” Hoppie** (Caribbean spiritual Baptist).

**Wednesday, April 30<sup>th</sup> at 11:00 a.m.**

**Woody Tanger Auditorium, Brooklyn College Library**

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#### **Finding Common Ground: Tolerance in Experimental Improvisation**

**Dan Blake**

Composer and saxophonist **Dan Blake** has led an eclectic career that includes recordings, festival, and television appearances with Grammy-winner Esperanza Spalding, works for mixed media like animation and sound installations, as well as the critically acclaimed *The Aquarian Suite* (Brooklyn Jazz Underground Records, 2012), which The Boston Phoenix called “one of the most ridiculously satisfying discs we’ve heard in some time.” Dan Blake recently earned his Ph.D. in composition from the Graduate Center, CUNY and his scholarly work focuses on theories of experimental improvisation.

**Wednesday, May 7<sup>th</sup> at 9:30 a.m.**

**Amersfort Lounge: 2nd floor, SUBO Brooklyn College**

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#### **Latin/Jewish Jazz with Anat Cohen, Arturo O’Farrill, and the Brooklyn College Jazz Ensemble** **Preconcert talk with Hankus Netsky**

An evening of Afro-Latin big band arrangements of Jewish dance melodies and Yiddish songs, as well as Latin classics played in traditional klezmer settings. Program will feature Afro-Latin jazz pianist and band leader **Arturo O’Farrill** with two of New York’s will be coordinated by Afro-Latin pianist and band leader Arturo O’Farrill and will most prominent Israeli-born jazz musicians, clarinetist **Anat Cohen** and trombonist **Rafi Malkiel**. Ethnomusicologist **Hankus Netsky**, leader of the Jewish Music Ensemble at the New England Conservatory of Music, will present a pre-concert talk on the intersection of Latin and Jewish jazz in New York City.

**Thursday, May 15<sup>th</sup> at 7:00 p.m.**

**Whitman Hall, Brooklyn College**