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1968/2022: The Seeds of Our Discontents

(Part Seven)

Music, Music, Music

Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio

"(It was) like something that came from another planet … And what was so strange was that so many people responded to someone very weird like Little Richard – instantly, with no sense of questioning – just 'Of course, I've been waiting all my life for this and I never knew it.'"

– Greil Marcus
Rock 'n Roll historian

"The diffusion of rock and roll was one of the wonders of the postwar world."
– Rock historians Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin
America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s [2]

"(Pioneers of rock 'n' roll) delivered a new version of America with their music, and more people than anyone can count are still trying to figure out how to live with it."

– Greil Marcus
Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music [3]

Danny and the Juniors, a white, Philadelphia-based "Doo Wop" group of the 1950s sang "Rock and Roll Is Here to Stay," and now, almost 70 years later with all its permutations and alternatives, it is indeed still here. Just as in last week's ***Book Notes*** about the counterculture, the temptation looms large to embark on an antiquarian nostalgia tour through the soundtrack of those 70-plus years. But I won't.

For those so inclined, the rabbit hole called YouTube beckons. For those of you who venture down that burrow, we hope to see you back again someday, but you should know it will be a long, long, and, as Jerry Garcia sang, strange trip.

No, we'll save the nostalgia for another day. As we continue our exploration of ***The American Tapestry Project's*** "The Seeds of Our Discontents," which I think we've fairly well established sprouted in the 1960s, I'm wondering, if Greil Marcus is correct, what was – is? – this "new version of America" rock 'n' roll revealed that people are still trying to figure out?

And, if it was – is? – a new version, what was the old version it supplanted? Or, if not supplanted, joined as either a complementary or a competing version?

Since Marcus made that observation in 1982 and here we are 40 years later in 2022's polarized America, could it be that some folks figured out the new version and rejected it in favor of another version?

And, if rock 'n' roll revealed a competing version of America, to which of ***The American Tapestry Project's*** two meta-threads does it sing? Does it sing to the exclusionary, essentialist story that sees America as a white, patriarchal, Christian society to which all Americans regardless of their ethnicity, gender, or creed must defer?

Or, does it sing to the protean American story that sees America as engaged in a great experiment of self-government all the while increasing the inclusiveness of the *"We"* in "We the People …" to include all of America's people?

These are some of the questions that American popular music of the past half-century or more has occasioned. They all, in some manner or form, speak to a larger question raised by the shifting shape of popular music and accelerating innovations in communications technology – *The Media* – these past 50-plus years: Did modern music and modern media fragment American culture (the essentialist view) or did they simply reveal the rich variety of American culture's inherent diversity (the protean view)?

Among some people there is the notion that rock 'n' roll and late-20th century popular music in general somehow fractured the unity of American culture.

The question becomes was American culture ever unified?

The answer is "yes," if by American culture we mean the culture of the 13 Atlantic Coast colonies and their offshoots that became the United States of America. From Jamestown Colony in 1607 through the end of the Federalist period circa 1820, American popular music – hymns, ballads, theater songs, drinking songs – was British. [4] Even "Yankee Doodle Dandy" was an adaptation of a British song. But even that culture was more heterogeneous than most people assume, for there were also German hymns in eastern Pennsylvania, African American music in slave communities, and New Orleans' music's French roots. [5]

That unity, however, did not last long. It was exploded not by rock 'n' roll in the 1950s and 1960s, but in the 1830s and 1840s. It was gone by post-Civil War America. Genuine "American" popular music emerged in the mid-19th century when multiple streams of influence converged. The European-American stream contributed not only the British music, but also English folk ballads, Irish, Scottish, and Italian songs, dance music, European folk music, and the music of the Scots-Irish who settled the backcountry; the African American stream blended African music with its riffs, polyrhythmic textures, and timbres and European traditions all centered on family and church. Layered onto this was a Latin American stream that also blended African and European traditions. [6]

Although today it is almost taboo to speak of it, American popular music began with 19th century minstrel shows that explicitly blended African and European traditions in which "white performers who blackened their skin carried out parodies of African American music, dance, dress, and dialect." [7] The first American song to be an international "hit" was white performer Tom Rice's "Jim Crow," which he sang in "black face while imitating a dance step called the 'cakewalk,' an Africanized version of the European quadrille." [8] Minstrel shows were overtly racist, but ironically they brought African American music out of the shadows and made it an essential part of American popular music. Eventually, Black artists performed in minstrel shows because there was no other avenue for them to earn a living from their art.

The history of American popular music bursts the bounds of any mere ***Book Note***. It began with minstrel shows that emerged in the 1830s "as an expression of a predominantly white urban youth culture, which sought to express its independence by appropriating black style" [9] a theme that repeats itself throughout the history of American "pop," to the stylized minstrel shows of the pre- and post-Civil War era with their derogatory stereotypes of Black Americans.

Then inspired by waves of immigrants it progressed from the brass bands and dance music of the mid-19th century to the birth of Tin Pan Alley in the late 19th and early 20th century dominated by immigrant Irish, Italian, and most especially Jewish artists like Irving Berlin.

Overlapping with all of that was the Ragtime Craze from 1896 to roughly the end of World War I that gave birth to jazz around 1900 in New Orleans and blossomed with the music of Louis Armstrong, King Oliver, Fletcher Henderson, and the dance fads of the early 1920s. Paul Whiteman and Bix Beiderbecke made it mainstream in the 1920s leading to swing music in the 1930s paralleling the establishment of the American Songbook of standard tunes throughout the first four decades of the 20th century.

Finally, there was the parallel development of southern music, which included "race" music, as African American music was once called, including gospel, blues, and jazz and its close cousin white southern "hillbilly" music, which gave rise to bluegrass, country music, honky-tonk, rockabilly, and country pop. The marriage of those two southern genres in the 1950s created rock 'n' roll.

As that incredibly brief and superficial sketch hints, the history of American "pop" showcases in all its inclusive syncopation and sometimes rancorous contention the beauty of the protean American story's rich diversity.

American popular music is America – the good, the bad, and the ugly.

The answer to my question – "Did modern music and media fragment American culture (the essentialist view) or did they simply reveal the rich variety of American culture's inherent diversity (the protean view) – is Yes, No, and Yes. The first "Yes" speaks to 19th century American popular music's fracturing of the British or Anglo-American culture by creating an "American music" that combined Anglo-American roots with Black American and immigrant American sources to create a new American music. A music that spoke to a version of America that included, granted not always with good grace and frequently with open hostility, all of America's many people.

The "No" speaks to an odd irony that is at the core our current discontents. There was a moment in the early and mid-20th century when the richness of that diverse musical heritage, of that diverse version of America was subsumed in a "mass" culture, a superficially seemingly unified version of American culture. It was a media creation that began with the rise of recorded music in the 19-teens, the rise of radio in the 1920s and 1930s, and the rise of the "talkies" – movies that "talked" which began with 1929's *The Jazz Singer* in which a black-faced Al Jolson sang of "Mammy" and "Swanee" – all of which culminated in the rise of television in the late 1940s and 1950s. (Next week in ***Book Notes*** on mediated America, we'll take a deeper look at this phenomenon).

Although it was a media generated illusion, there appeared for a time in the early to mid-20th century to be a unified American culture, a version of America that was white, patriarchal, middle-class, and Christian in which Black Americans and immigrants were present but peripheral. Although his America was more complex than this simple portrait, James Truslow Adams described this place in his ***The Epic of America***, in which he coined the phrase "the American Dream." On radio it was Bing Crosby crooning in your ear about a "White Christmas," in movies and on records it was Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller inviting everyone to "swing," and on TV years later it was Dinah Shore exhorting you to "see the USA in your Chevrolet," Lawrence Welk setting you dancing and the "Hit Parade" telling you which records to buy, which songs to sing and which dances to dance.

And it was an overwhelmingly white world. For a taste of it, spend several days binge watching whatever is on Turner Classic Movies – the genuine classics and the "B" films, which when there was once such a thing as a "double-feature" were the undercard – and what you'll find is a world that uncannily reflected a reality that was true as recently as 1960 and the dawn of *the '60s* when America was still 85 percent white.

But it was not all white and not all Christian.

If you look and listen closely, you'll see that other America. You'll see the urban poor, the rural poor (think Okies in John Ford's 1940 adaptation of Steinbeck's 1939 Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Grapes of Wrath);* you'll see the immigrant's seeking their place; you'll see hints of Black America; you'll even see the indigenous people, but they are all what moviemakers call "background."

The main story is up front and it's exclusionary.

The second "Yes" is what Greil Marcus meant when he said that the pioneers of rock 'n' roll gave Americans a new version of America that "they are still trying to figure out." I think he is only partially correct. It wasn't a new version of America. What rock 'n' roll's pioneers inadvertently gave back to all Americans was a version of America that was as richly diversified as America itself. I say they did it inadvertently, but some of the musicians did know what they were doing. Most didn't. They just wanted to make music using the resources at hand. Those resources were eclectic and inclusionary as they fused all of America's many people and their music into a chorus of songs.

Just like American popular music, the culture-busting sound of rock 'n' roll's history bursts the bounds of a mere ***Book Note***. Rock 'n' roll emerges out of the marriage of Black rhythm and blues, African American gospel music, white southern gospel music, bluegrass and its offspring honky-tonk country music, and its offspring rockabilly. The genius of Sun Records' Sam Phillips was to intuit that if he could find a good-looking white kid who could sound Black, then he could make a fortune. Although he didn't make the fortune, Elvis Presley and Colonel Tom Parker did. What rock 'n' roll music in the late 1950s leading up to our hinge year of 1968 did was show Americans a better version of themselves. It was the older and authentic version of America. The music of Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, The Drifters, Sam Cooke, Aretha Franklin, and a literal legion of others exploded the myths of racism and segregation. While what they sang had political undertones, and in a few instances, overtones, most people just wanted to enjoy; most people just wanted to dance to the music.

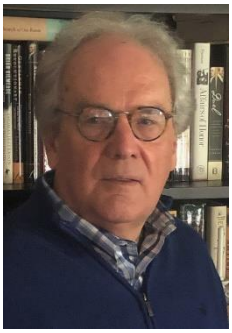
By our hinge year of 1968, much of that music had become overtly political. In the ensuing decades rock's many permutations challenged, criticized, celebrated and, on occasion, condemned America for not living up to its glittering ideals. In the process, it still breathed life and energy into the protean version of America. Rock 'n' roll brought that version of the authentic, richly varied America back to center stage by the simple fact of its own incredible diversity of singers, styles, and sounds.

American "pop" – American "rock" – it is America.

While those myths of racist, sexist, and homophobic exclusion might have been exploded, we've scarcely arrived at that more perfect union of which our Constitution speaks. But we have arrived, even with all our tribulations, at a better place than the mid-20th century myth of an exclusionary America.

But, as we have repeatedly seen, not everyone is happy about that, for there are those who want to rewind the tape back to that bleached out, ersatz unity of 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s America.

The story of American "pop" is too large for a ***Book Note***. Perhaps I'll do a series on it in the future, or develop a presentation for the Jefferson Educational Society, or do several programs in my podcast ***The American Tapestry Project*** on the topic. But for now, one of "the seeds of our discontents" is our 21st century inability to completely, as a society, digest the rich diversity of America's cultural heritage that 20th century rock 'n' roll brought back from the periphery, upped the amps, and made us once again see and hear.



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"Rock & Roll Hall of Fame sunset" at **Wikicommons** available here accessed July 13, 2022.

End Notes

1. Greil Marcus is quoted in Chris Magoc's ***A Progressive History of American Democracy Since 1945: American Dreams, Hard Realities*** (New York: Routledge, 2022), p. 80.
2. Isserman, Maurice and Michael Kazin. ***America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s.*** Sixth Ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 169.
3. Marcus, Greil. ***Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music***, rev. ed. (New York: Dutton, 1982), p.4.
4. *"American Popular Song: A Brief History"* at **History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web** available here accessed July 17, 2022.
5. Ibid.
6. Starr, Larry and Christopher Waterman. ***American Popular Music***. PDF available here accessed July 17, 2022, pp. 6-11.
7. Ibid., p.14.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p.15.

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